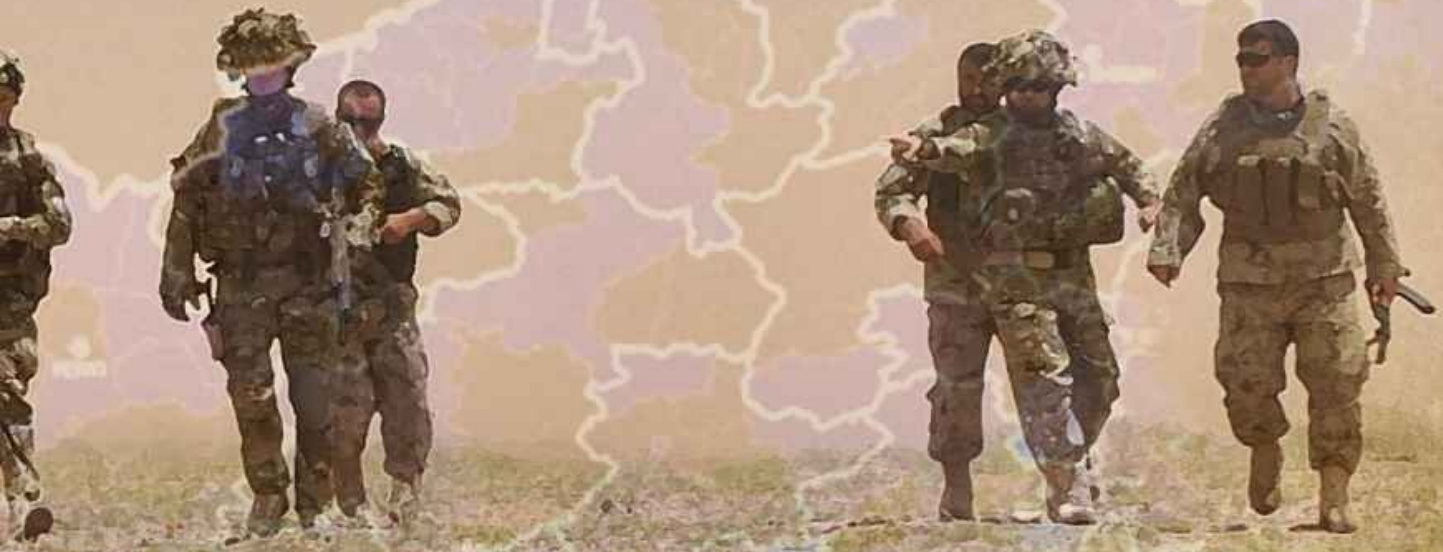
OPERATION HERRICK

AN UNOFFICIAL HISTORY OF BRITISH MILITARY OPERATIONS IN AFGHANISTAN 2001-2014



By

'SALLUST'

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An unofficial history of
British military operations
in Afghanistan 2001-2014

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ISBN-13: 978-1519225511

ISBN-10: 1519225512

Dedicated to wonderful nieces Teresa, Sophia, and Isabel.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Afghanistan War generated an impressive corpus of books and studies. By the second half of the war, the Afghanistan Conflict Analyst Bibliography had already extended to some 250 pages. It would be impractical to acknowledge all the authors that have helped shape this author's understanding of what was plainly an obdurately complex conflict. It is hoped the footnotes illustrate that they were many. Special mention should be made of some of the outstanding authors in the field. The output of Anthony Cordesman, the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategic Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Relations, was prodigious. Over the course of the war he generated close to one hundred reports, dense with trenchant, honest criticism. Antonio Giustozzi has good claim to be the Afghan expert. His books and studies provided indispensable understanding of Afghan society and recent history. Michael Martin's intimate study of the war from the perspective of Helmandis was frankly outstanding. James Fergusson wrote the first of the reflective works on the war. Frank Ledwidge, a Naval Reservist, wrote the key work challenging British counter-insurgency practice. Emile Simpson, a Gurkha officer, published a brilliant academic study on the nature of modern counter-insurgencies. Retired Generals Christopher Elliott and Andrew MacKay wrote intelligent works that questioned the workings of the MOD. Ambassador Sherard Cowper-Coles, a colourful and controversial personality, courageously challenged the prosecution of the war. Rory Stewart and Gerald Knaus offered the incisive book examining the viability of western interventions. David Mansfield was the well informed voice on the opium trade. Jack Fairweather capped his already impressive account of the Iraq War with an equally comprehensive survey of the Afghanistan War. Two organizations stood out: the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN) and the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). Both offered honesty in a war unfortunately characterized by dishonesty. The author is especially grateful to the many soldiers who wrote of their experiences in regimental blogs. These were commonly the most honest and insightful accounts of the war.

Special thanks must go to Frank de Planta, an old school friend and former army officer who loyally read through the text and pointed out many errors. This would have been a far poorer book but for this effort. When he was young he used to say: 'You are lucky in life

if you can count on one or two good friends'. He certainly proved the case.

The author would also like to acknowledge and thank Yanina and Alexander Goldenberg at Gold Wind Limited who expertly prepared and arranged the e-publication of this book.

To the author's best knowledge, this is the first book to include the Afghanistan War roll of honour and unit lists. This book was written for those names. It is hoped the manuscript honestly recognizes their sacrifice.

Manui Dat Cognitio Vires

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FOREWORD
Robert McNamara's
11 Lessons from Vietnam

The Afghanistan War was an American war, not a British war. It would have been an omission, then, not to preface this book with Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's 11 Lessons from Vietnam.[1] These are paraphrased below. Reading them, it will be obvious to the reader why.

1. We failed to understand our opponents and exaggerated the threat to the United States.

2. We failed to understand South Vietnam and viewed the country through the lens of our own values.

3. We failed to reckon on the power of nationalism and how it drives people to fight and die for their cause.

4. We were deeply ignorant of the history, culture, and society of Indochina.

5. We failed to acknowledge the limitations of modern, high-technology war and failed to win the hearts and minds of people from a different culture.

6. We failed to involve Congress and the American people in an open and honest debate before committing to war.

7. When the war unraveled, we did not credibly explain our strategy or actions.

8. We failed to recognize that we are not all-wise and we do not hold a universal mandate to impose our values on other nations.

9. We failed to get allies to fully support the US-led war, except in cosmetic ways.

10. We failed to recognize that not every problem in international affairs has a solution.

11. We failed to organize our own government machinery to effectively deal with the intractably complex nature of the war.

Twenty-six years after the American withdrawal from Saigon, these lessons had been entirely forgotten. Robert McNamara, of course, passed away in 2009, and thus lived long enough to witness the same follies repeated again in Iraq and Afghanistan.

CHAPTER 1
THE PLANES OPERATION

On 14 September 2001, Secretary of State for Defence, Geoffrey William Hoon, rose to address a packed House of Commons.[2] The most shocking public event in recent memory had taken place just three days earlier in the United States. The moment deserved the gravitas of Churchill but a four page speech delivered to the expectant House, in the event, fell flat. Hostile journalists perceived Hoon as a Blair acolyte and had already labelled the minister ‘Geoff Who?’. The minister himself would later reveal his Blairite credentials in rather unattractive ways. Entrapped in a media sting, Hoon boasted to an undercover reporter that what he was really looking forward to was ‘translating my knowledge and contacts about the international scene into something that frankly makes money’.[3] After leaving office he fulfilled this lubricious ambition, taking a senior post in a defence firm, in the customary fashion. From humble origins (the son of a railway worker), Hoon perfectly fitted the mould of the archetypal New Labour politician: the unembarrassed covetous socialist, keen on self-advancement. After leaving school he read law at Cambridge, and subsequently worked as a university lecturer before being called to the Bar. This legal background was evident when he spoke to the House. The performance was measured and he gave the impression that he was rather more concerned with protecting the government from opposition criticism, than in rising to the historical occasion. Rather than reassuring his listeners, he reinforced a growing reputation which the government had acquired for spin over substance.

After expressing condolences to the American people, Hoon informed the House that following the recent terrorist attacks in the United States, his government was prepared and ready to protect the British people. A raft of melodramatic emergency measures was then announced inflated by some hollow boasts. Britain, he stated, had some of the best anti-terrorist capabilities in the world. Robust contingency plans were in place to ensure the safety of Britons. Military units were being placed at immediate notice to move. Anti-aircraft missiles were being readied to protect key sites. The RAF, which was ‘constantly at a high state of readiness’, was prepared to intercept all enemies.

No defence secretary had spoken like this since the outbreak of the Second World War

and, in truth, it was all eyewash. Historically, the home defence of Britain had always been neglected, except in moments of grave national emergency when invasion threatened. No government had ever sought to spend the funds needed to truly defend Britain, trusting instead in the English Channel and the deterrent of the Royal Navy. This position had not changed in September 2001.

The statement then rambled like a campaign speech. The armed forces were flexible, professional and dedicated. The police were unstinting. The latter had been placed on full alert and were working the longest possible hours. No terrorist would pass undetected. In short, the country should not panic. In a partisan aside the Defence Secretary reminded the House that it was his party that had established a Civil Contingencies Secretariat several months ago – in reality an under-resourced office in Whitehall - and that this piece of prescience was now paying dividends. 'Of course,' he went on, 'we have intelligence expertise and systems in place that are organised to try to prevent these attacks from happening', a vacant claim that would be punctured within a few years.

The previous day, NATO had invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, arguably the single most important measure taken in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks as it forced European nations to provide military support to the United States. Once this genie was released from the bottle, it would prove very difficult for European governments to wriggle out of the commitment. Article 5 stated unequivocally that, 'An armed attack against one shall be considered an armed attack against all'. This was the first time in the organisation's history the key clause had been invoked. Britain had both interest and obligation to support the United States, even if - and Hoon prudently stopped short of saying so - this meant going to war.

On the other side of the Atlantic, an equally portentous resolution was agreed on the same day Hoon addressed the Commons. In a unanimous vote, Congress passed an Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), granting permission to the President to conduct whatever actions deemed necessary to hunt down the protagonists behind the September 11 attacks. The last time a US president had been offered such a free hand to wage war was in 1964 – the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. Johnson pocketed this resolution then deployed it the following year, leading America into a ruinous war in Vietnam. Bush would follow the same path, using the AUMF as the constitutional basis for a 'long war' on terrorism. With such unfortunate precedent, congressmen may have been wise to reconsider granting their President such sweeping powers.

By chance, Britain was already in a position to pursue military operations in the Middle

East because a task force was being deployed to Oman for pre-planned manoeuvres - Exercise Swift Sword. This had been intended as a showcase of military capability as well as an exercise in defence diplomacy. Instead, the task force would now be readied for possible contingency operations in the region. Hoon stated, somewhat disingenuously, that Exercise Swift Sword demonstrated Britain's resolve to maintain her armed forces at a peak of professional effectiveness, as well as her solidarity with Arab allies. Commentators suggested that the exercise was only taking place because of an Omani threat to defence sales. Over-stretched, over-budgeted and with simultaneous operations in Northern Ireland, the Balkans and Sierra Leone, the government had vainly sought to cancel the exercise. Swift Sword duly went ahead, but determined not to spend a penny more than necessary, the Challenger tanks deployed to Oman were not fitted with sand filters, an operation that would have cost millions of pounds.[4] Predictably they broke down – hardly an endorsement of the government's commitment to the effectiveness of the armed forces – but one that was hastily forgotten in the events that followed.

Perhaps any defence secretary would have fallen short in the days following 11 September 2001. On that bright Tuesday morning, two civil airliners, American 11 and United 175, crashed into and collapsed the Twin Towers in New York killing 2,603 people. American 77 crashed into a wing of the Pentagon killing 125 civilian and military personnel. And United 93 crashed in Pennsylvania, following a struggle between hijackers and passengers, which resulted in the deaths of all on board the aircraft. 246 crew and passengers were killed in the four aircraft, excluding the hijackers. In total, 2,974 people representing ninety nationalities were killed. At least 104 people jumped from the burning towers in New York creating some of the most painful images of that day. It was the largest single loss of life on American soil from foreign attack and it had been perpetrated by just nineteen, mostly Saudi Arabian, hijackers. These men did not quite achieve vaporised martyrdom. The remains of four of them were found on the rooftop of the adjoining Deutsche Bank building. Historically, it was the most deadly terrorist attack ever recorded. The Defence Secretary was absolutely right in one respect: 'To commit acts of this nature requires a fanaticism and a wickedness that is beyond our normal comprehension'. Perhaps the only consolation in the awful tally of dead was the number of children killed – remarkably just eight lost their lives in the September 11 attacks.

The attack on the Twin Towers created an appalling and iconic image, but of what? A Babel tower of words would be erected in their place analysing the significance of the September 11 attacks. The most prescient were written by Anthony Cordesman, the

Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategic Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Relations, just one week after the attacks:

'Invasions and efforts at regime change are a last resort. We must avoid military adventures and reacting to special interests. These include "lobbies" calling for regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq…Nothing could be worse than sending major ground forces across hostile territory into the middle of nowhere in search of a dispersed and hidden enemy with no strategic objective other than to replace one bad regime with a fragmented one, and with the certainty of region-wide hostility and a long-term political backlash.'[5]

This wisdom was ignored.

For those who saw it happen before their eyes, and for the billions who watched the replays on television screens, there was horror and disbelief. So improbable were the events that an F-16 pilot scrambled from Langley Air Base, on seeing a wing of the Pentagon burning, assumed a Russian attack. 'I thought the bastards snuck one past us', he later told an inquiry.[6] President Bush was visiting a school in Florida when the attacks occurred. His reaction was visceral and defined the next eight years of his two-term presidency. Within minutes of the attacks he called Vice-President Dick Cheney. 'We're at war,' he told him, '…somebody's going to pay'.[7] Stubbornly, he held on to this *idée fixe* right up to the handover ceremony with his successor. Like the Texan sheriff he portrayed, and barely pausing to gather his thoughts, George W. Bush transformed into a war president. His resolve would remain undimmed, but if someone was going to pay, as he threatened, who was it to be?

Within hours of the attacks, American intelligence agencies went into over-drive and spat out Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda and Afghanistan. Later, a 1998 fatwa issued through the London-based *Al Quds* newspaper, by five Islamic radicals including bin Laden, would be cited as the inspirational source of the attacks (*Text of World Islamic Front's Statement Urging Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders*).[8] But this linkage amounted to assertion of guilt before the offer of proof. What was the proof and why bin Laden and not the other four signatories?[9]

A year before the September 11 attacks, bin Laden had already risen to prominence in American consciousness. In testimony to the Foreign Relations Committee, CIA Director George Tenet offered:

'…our profile in the world and thus our attraction as a terrorist target will not diminish any time soon. We are learning more about the perpetrators every day… and I can tell you that they are a diverse lot motivated by many causes. Usama Bin Ladin is still foremost among these terrorists, because of the immediacy and seriousness of the threat he poses… we believe he could still strike without additional warning. Indeed, Usama Bin Ladin's organization and other terrorist groups are placing increased emphasis on developing surrogates to carry out attacks in an effort to avoid detection. For example, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) is linked closely to Bin Ladin's organization and has operatives located around the world-including in Europe, Yemen, Pakistan, Lebanon, and Afghanistan. And, there is now an intricate web of alliances among Sunni extremists worldwide, including North Africans, radical Palestinians, Pakistanis, and Central Asians.'[10]

In hindsight these were prophetic words indeed, but they were made against a background of scores of threats identified by the CIA chief, and principally against the great obsession of American intelligence agencies during this period – weapons of mass destruction. Nobody saw the planes coming.

A problem with the view that cast the so-called 1998 *Jihad Fatwa* as the foundation stone of the September 11 attacks was that this fatwa was just one in a series of rambling, half coherent pronouncements made by Osama bin Laden following the first Gulf War. In August 1996 he had issued a similar fatwa entitled *Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Holy Places*, a long diatribe mostly aimed at the Saudi ruling family, or 'the dog dugs sheathed in gold silk', as *Inspire* the al-Qaeda magazine would later poetically describe the Sauds. Nor were bin Laden and his co-authors alone in their penmanship. The Arabic speaking media – and in the modern era, the internet – had been oiled with anti-Western sentiments for many years. The 1998 *Jihad Fatwa* – as an example in this genre of anti-Western vitriol - was mostly noteworthy for its patent fantasy.

What the fatwa confirmed was bin Laden's continued obsession with American servicemen in 'the lands of Islam in the holiest places, the Arabian peninsula'. For bin Laden this presence was a 'fact' of 'occupation'. Iraq and Palestine were also cited as instances of American malevolence, but the stone in bin Laden's shoe was clearly American soldiers in Saudi Arabia. When bin Laden (and the co-authors) stated that it was the duty of every Muslim to kill American soldiers or civilians 'in any country in which it is possible to do it', the aim of this imagined general slaughter was the 'liberation' of the 'holy mosque' of Mecca. The locus of the fantasy massacre was not in fact any Western

country – and certainly not continental America - it was firmly located in Saudi Arabia where ‘ulema, leaders, youths and soldiers’ were urged to launch a raid on ‘Satan’s US troops and the devil’s supporters’ (the plump princes who spurned bin Laden and later sent him into exile). The injunction to kill Americans everywhere and anywhere was a rhetorical echo of a Koranic passage quoted at the beginning of the fatwa: ‘Slay the pagans wherever ye find them, seize them, beleaguer them’. Later that year bin Laden would tell a PBS reporter that the battle would inevitably move to American soil if the ‘injustice’ continued, but his words sounded more like empty boasting rather than a real and planned threat.[11] This was typical of bin Laden who raised his own profile by posing as the rebroadcast transmitter for radical Islamism where others kept themselves discreetly below the radar of intelligence services.

Bin Laden’s pre-eminence was also surprising in other ways. Despite the self-mythologizing, he was, essentially, a wealthy recruiting agent who had played a peripheral role in the Soviet-Afghan War. The CIA barely rated him and his contribution to the resistance was judged marginal. Mostly, his skills appeared to be administrative and organisational. Like his construction magnate father he was good at making contacts and winning contracts - and in the beginning he had his own money to back the projects. He would later become a relatively successful road construction manager in his own right in Sudan. When invited to this country, bin Laden not only offered construction services but also security services, or military training. He provided employment to ex-fighters, whether soldiers or mercenaries, contracted by client governments. In principle, this was no different to an American or British government contracting a security firm to provide quasi-military services in a war zone. In August 1990, after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, and on the eve of the first Gulf War, Osama bin Laden was not a terrorist. Rather, he was a young businessman with a certain reputation, in some circles, gained from his participation in the Soviet-Afghan War. Bin Laden’s slide into a criminal existence was driven by three events: first, Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait; second, the rebuff of his offer of assistance by the Saudi government; and third, the arrival of coalition, and in particular American troops, in his native Saudi Arabia. It was the latter in particular that darkened bin Laden’s landscape. Even during this period, bin Laden was not emerging as a potential terrorist leader but more an aggrieved Saudi national with views shared by thousands of his compatriots. During the first Gulf War and in its aftermath, the Saudi government muzzled numerous clerics and other dissident voices calling for the expulsion of Americans from the Holy Lands. Osama bin Laden was not unique by any means.

Bin Laden was pushed into an outlaw life by the revocation of his citizenship and the seizure of his assets by the Saudi Arabian government in 1994. The quarrel was internecine but bin Laden blamed America for his exile. The subsequent *9/11 Commission Report* would reveal in fascinating detail how bin Laden's gift for networking turned him consciously, and perhaps sometimes unknowingly, into a financier and quartermaster for a wide range of desperadoes, malcontents and outright criminals. There was a sense that bin Laden was simply being milked – like his wealthy compatriots – by fellow Muslims who had become accustomed to viewing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as the fecund desert milk cow that she was. He seemed to enjoy playing the role of the wealthy Saudi rubbing shoulders with the wild-haired radicals living on the fringes of Islamic societies. It would be a stretch to say that bin Laden was completely gullible but there was in his generosity a hint of carelessness, if not ignorance, of the groups he was helping and where his money was going. Did bin Laden really understand what was happening in Burma, Uganda, Bosnia or the Philippines – all countries with which he was associated? Was he seriously promoting his vision of a pan-Muslim caliphate, or simply indulging a fantasy? Was he the first Mahdi of the 21st century, or a gasbag? The period before the September 11 attacks was undoubtedly a sort of golden age for dreamers and jihadists free to move and communicate in ways that would become impossible after the attacks. This strange world of double values and flexible business arrangements is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that bin Laden opened offices of an organisation called al Khifa, a subsidiary of the umbrella organisation MAK (*Mektab al Khidemat*), in six North American cities.[12] This behaviour suggested a business impresario seeking new opportunities, not an underground terrorist seeking to destroy America. At the time, *Jihad* magazine, published by MAK, was on sale in forty-nine countries (including the United States for just $2.60).[13]

The analysis of terrorist networks also detailed how bin Laden was 'just one among many diverse terrorist barons'.[14] In fact, no terrorist attacks that took place between Osama bin Laden's first self-proclaimed fatwa against America in 1992 and the much quoted 1998 *Jihad Fatwa*, could be attributed *directly* to bin Laden himself. There was no direct evidence linking Osama bin Laden to the 1993 World Trade Centre bombs; the 1995 Riyadh bomb; the 1995 Manila air plot; or the 1996 Khobar Towers bomb. Bin Laden, far from being a dynamic terrorist leader or perhaps in his view, a knight of Allah, seemed more an embittered Saudi rich boy. In this context it was surprising that by 1997 the CIA was already circulating alarmist reports such as *Usama Bin Ladin Trying to Develop WMD capability?*[15] It was not until the following year that bin Laden would be linked directly

with a terrorist attack against the United States (the Dar es Salaam and Nairobi embassy bombs), but even in these two attacks it could not be confirmed that he was main player.

The other important consideration relates to the name ‘al-Qaeda’ (or ‘the base’).[16] According to bin Laden, there was no such thing as an organisation called ‘al-Qaeda’. As author Jason Bourke has explained in *The 9/11 Wars*, ‘al-Qaeda’ has multiple meanings, beyond the literal meaning of ‘a base’. Post-September 11, bin Laden explicitly stated to the Al Jazeera journalist Taysor Allouni that the West had got it wrong – he had not founded a group with the specific name of ‘al-Qaeda’. Rather, this was the name of a camp ‘brother Abu Ubaida’ had established in the Soviet-Afghan War, which Western reporting had subsequently inflated into an organisation. He went on to claim that this ‘base’ had become ‘a nation’, illustrating the difficulties of interpreting this multi-layered Arabic word. The sense bin Laden appears to have been conveying was that of ‘al-Qaeda’ as a foundation philosophy spreading across the *umma*, or Muslim world.

During the Soviet-Afghan War, the organisation bin Laden ran jointly with the Palestinian radical Abdullah Azzam was the MAK or ‘Bureau of Services’. The two then seemed to fall out. In August 1988, fifteen loose jihadists decided to establish a separate military group that would comprise of a general camp, a special camp, and a ‘qaeda’ or base camp (from the minutes of the meeting, an ‘al-Qaeda al Askiriyah’, or ‘military base’). This group was a rag-bag of characters including an Omani, Nigerian, Libyan, Egyptian, Iraqi, and Saudi Arabians. A man named Abu Ayoub al-Iraqi was nominated emir, with bin Laden appointed as ‘general emir’. The chief protagonists in the group appear to have been the Egyptians, notably Abu-Ubaidah al Banjshiri, a former army officer, and the aggressive Mohammed Atef (Abu Hafs), a former police officer.[17] Rather optimistically, the group forecast they would be able to train up to 314 fighters within six months, an oddly precise number. This never happened. Following the Soviet withdrawal, there appears to have been some sort of reconciliation between bin Laden and Azzam. By now, the former had decided that the Afghan war was over, and there was talk of migrating to Sudan to support the regime in its civil war against the Christian south. At the time, President Omar al Bashir was offering an open invitation to numerous jihadist groups to support his regime. The Egyptians apparently convinced bin Laden to continue funding one of the training camps, before he left – Azzam’s original ‘al-Qaeda al Sulbah’ or ‘solid foundation’ for jihad elsewhere - but the words referred to a physical location, not an entity, and certainly not a terrorist organisation. Bin Laden never referred to an ‘al-Qaeda’ in any of his fatwas or other pronouncements after his departure from Afghanistan.

Whatever plans he had for promoting jihad, bin Laden chose first to return home in the winter of 1989, effectively ending his Afghan adventure. He seems to have toyed with the idea of becoming a film producer, reflecting his lifelong fascination with visual media. Meanwhile, a core group of former Afghan jihadists known to bin Laden migrated to Sudan and bought properties and farms, collaborating with Islamic Jihad of Egypt. In Jeddah, bin Laden ran no militant organisation and would not have been allowed to anyway.

Following his expulsion from Saudi Arabia in 1992, bin Laden permanently decamped to Sudan. His business interests were numerous, as the list of trading companies associated with his name later revealed: Wadi al Aqiq Company, Taba Investments, Ladin International Company, Hijra Construction, Al Thema al Mubaraka, Al Khudrat Transportation, and the Khartoum Tannery. He also ran a peanut and sesame farm, and a fruit and vegetable business. Whatever else they may have been, bin Laden and his associates were keen entrepreneurs (though not that successful as a weak Sudanese pound against the US dollar made for a difficult business climate). During this period of his exile, from 1992-1998, bin Laden was associated with two radical organisations, neither of which he tried to conceal. The first was called the Committee for Advice and Reform, set up in London offices in July 1994. He used this committee to bombard the Arab-speaking world (or anyone who cared to digest his invective) with salvos of propaganda directed against the Saudi regime. This was an especially low point in his life: cut off from his family, divorced by his wife, abandoned by his first and favourite son, and apparently losing $15 million in his Sudanese businesses.[18] The second was the ‘International Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Crusaders and the Jews’, announced alongside Ayman al-Zawahiri at a press conference in early 1998. It is notable that the other four signatories of this fatwa all titled themselves heads of jihadist organisations. Bin Laden alone signed in his name and belonging to no particular organisation.

In CIA files, Osama bin Laden was simply known by his acronym ‘UBL’. The CIA’s own description of bin Laden in 1997 was ‘extremist financier’.[19] Hundreds of wealthy Arabs might fit this description, funnelling money to Islamic charities whose funds end up being used for extremist purposes. ‘UBL’ was a cultural commonplace, not a maverick.

MI5 also downplayed his importance. As late as 1995, British authorities assessed there was no evidence linking bin Laden to terrorism, and further, that it was unlikely he would promote terrorism if he chose to live in Britain (bin Laden was flirted with the idea of settling in London at this time). This position was abruptly reversed the following year,

resulting in a precautionary exclusion order. Some shoddy politics may have been behind this decision. This was a period when the British government was demonstrating its liberal credentials by giving residency rights to extremists like Abu Hamza al-Masri and Abu Qatada al-Filistini, but simultaneously and hypocritically denying them to personalities like bin Laden. It may be presumed that a fear of offending the Saudi government - on which the British defence industry was so dependent - was a factor in this decision-making.

A longer and better description for 'UBL' might have been 'the Osama bin Laden Finance Network'. Saudi Arabia was not short of extremist financiers siphoning money to dodgy causes, so this was hardly a unique charge. When President Clinton ordered the first cruise missile strikes against bin Laden, he only referred to him as a financier of terrorist groups. Probably the most pervasive such network was Benevolence International Foundation Inc (BIF), incorporated in Illinois, an offshoot of the Saudi *Lajnatt Al-Birr Al-Islamiah* relief organisation. For years, BIF funnelled money to jihadist causes from the comfort of its American offices, including bin Laden's group, and was largely untroubled by the US authorities.

American intelligence focus on bin Laden had a quality of accident about it from the beginning. Unable to find an internal candidate for a newly created post within the CIA's Operations Directorate, so the story goes, an outsider was recruited. When asked to pick a subject the selected individual picked bin Laden because he happened to remember the name from a number of reports – thus did bin Laden find himself subject to scrutiny.[20] His value as a subject of study increased when a 'walk-in' ex-bin Laden employee, the Brooklyn-based Sudanese Jamal al-Fadl, offered to reveal the workings of the network to CIA officials. Al-Fadl, it transpired, had stolen money from bin Laden and was a temperamental witness. Nonetheless, an intelligence snowball effect followed. Was bin Laden that important because he deserved to be, or because an intelligence reporting apparatus had accidentally elevated him to this position? Why didn't the US authorities investigate BIF or other similar organisations instead? When the finances of these organisations were finally investigated they appeared to equal anything bin Laden had been up to in their scale and scope. The al-Qaeda title itself seems to have been created by American legal imperatives.[21] To charge bin Laden under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organisations Act (RICO), he necessarily had to belong to an organisation. Thus it appears was al-Qaeda born, in a literal sense, the bastard son of an American legal process and the testimony of al-Fadl. Who actually coined the title al-Qaeda, *as the name*

of a terrorist organisation, remains unclear. The answer may well lie in FBI files. Al-Qaeda was only officially declared a foreign terrorist organisation in 1999. At some point over this period, bin Laden started using the name in response to the American charges.

Whether or not an 'al-Qaeda' actually existed, bin Laden did use his Sudanese farms to offer 'refresher training' for jihadists. Following an incident when locals complained over loud explosions, the training appears to have been curtailed, but it nonetheless continued. It is also known with certainty that an over-eager bin Laden tried to ingratiate himself with the Bashir regime by procuring chemical weapons and a barrel of uranium (in fact, a hoax perpetrated by a Sudanese officer trying to make a quick $1.5 million by selling red mercury to the gullible bin Laden). What quicker way to wipe out the Christians in the south, it was suggested? These madcap schemes aside, he also facilitated arms to co-religionists in the horn of Africa and Yemen, as well as providing funds for various jihadist causes. His camps contained the later infamous *Encyclopaedia of Jihad*, a several thousand page long guide to unconventional warfare and terrorism. These were internecine Muslim struggles but there was always a danger the squabbles might be displaced against Western targets.

The final catalyst for bin Laden's descent into open terrorism appears not to have been his long-standing grudge against the United States (American forces were by now withdrawing from Saudi Arabia) but once again his own domestic circumstances – explicitly, his unresolved homelessness. In 1996 the Saudi government put pressure on the Sudanese government to expel bin Laden, forcing him to resettle in Afghanistan, the only country that would immediately take him and the landscape of his youthful, romanticized past. The Saudi authorities then proceeded to seize his assets dismantling bin Laden's business empire. These were difficult moments for bin Laden and another low point in his life. Exiled twice-over and now impoverished, bin Laden's relationship with the Taliban, facilitated by Pakistan's secret services, was not an instant success. Afghanistan remained a divided country with competing warlords and bin Laden at first found it judicious to court both the Taliban and their opponents. But it was Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, who recognised the value of bin Laden's ad hoc security force and who provided the refugee with fresh employment. Within a year bin Laden had resurrected his business connections and was again operating profitably. A visitor to Afghanistan might regularly see bin Laden employees driving around in vehicles with ministry of defence number plates and Arab fighters were being despatched to the front line (the 55th Brigade), to support the Taliban's inconclusive war against the Northern Alliance. As much as

anything it appears the greedy Mullah Omar was impressed and attracted by bin Laden's seemingly bottomless financial reservoirs. Soon the national air carrier Ariana was being used to fly over bin Laden's cash.

Mullah Omar was not the only individual to notice bin Laden's value as financial backer. The impoverished and unhinged Egyptian – Dr Ayman Muhammad Rabie al-Zawahiri, head of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and co-author of the 1998 *Jihad Fatwa* - saw in bin Laden a mechanism for realizing his dreams of an Islamic revolution (or more accurately, the overthrow of the Mubarak regime). Like bin Laden, al-Zawahiri's antipathy towards America was at root a protest against imprisonment, torture and finally exile from his own native country. On the Arab street, America and the Jews were to blame for pretty much everything, from electricity cuts to the rampant corruption in the Arab world's autocracies. Following that exile, it was al-Zawahiri's alliance with bin Laden that gestated the 1998 *Jihad Fatwa*, and it was the Egyptian Islamic Jihad – not 'al-Qaeda' - that was probably decisive in the East African embassy bombings. One of the reasons why al-Fadl quit 'al-Qaeda' and handed himself over to the FBI was precisely because the Egyptians had become so dominant: indeed the eventual leader of the September 11 attacks was Mohammed Atta, an Egyptian. If 'al-Qaeda' had a manual it was *The Declaration of Jihad Against the Country's Tyrants, Military Series*. This was the work of the Egyptians and essentially a blueprint for the overthrow of the Egyptian government, not a plan for waging war against the West. To Westerners, al-Qaeda would always be the evil genie that sprung from the bottle of Islamic hatred towards the West. To an Arab with hindsight, Egyptian Islamic Jihad's linking up with bin Laden was probably the first drumbeat of the Arab Spring and the revolt against apostate *jahiliyya* or false Muslims. Without the baleful influence of al-Zawahiri one could have envisaged bin Laden drifting back into the comfortable existence of generous Saudi benefactor, enjoying the glamour of networking with individuals with false passports and tall tales, but not becoming involved in the dirty work. His business plan – however unrealistic - may well have been to eventually restore good favour with his family and the Saudi regime, once the old fuddy-duddies had passed away. As much as anything bin Laden seemed to share the indolence of some of his wealthy countrymen – hired helps did the work, not the prince himself – and he was becoming an older and somewhat sicker man.

Despite the uncertainty and a serious concern that he might be acquitted through lack of sufficient evidence, the CIA nevertheless planned and nearly executed a scheme to capture and arraign bin Laden in 1997. Sufficient intelligence noise had been generated to raise bin Laden's profile to the point where a kidnap operation was countenanced. Ironically,

the operation was cancelled at the eleventh hour because it might have led to a loss of innocent lives. Had the CIA executed this operation it still appears plausible the events of September 11, or a similar attack, might have unfolded as they did. Another trait of bin Laden was a tendency to inflate and believe in his own self-importance, a trait much in evidence in the interviews he gave to *Time Magazine*, the television broadcaster CNN, and to the veteran journalist and Middle-East expert Robert Fisk.

After the 1998 embassy bombings, American determination to bring bin Laden to justice hardened. Whatever ambiguities may have existed before over his status and importance, these were set aside and he became a priority target. A picture was painted of assumed prime culpability even when the evidence was sometimes acknowledged to be sketchy. The embassy attacks were claimed by the 'Islamic Army for the Liberation of the Holy Places', not 'al-Qaeda'. When asked directly whether he was responsible for the attacks, bin Laden obfuscated, stating that the 'World Islamic Front' had issued a fatwa against Jews and Crusaders, but he stopped short of admitting responsibility. In 1999, a bin Laden aircraft hijack scare was raised but the authors of the scare admitted: 'no group directly tied to Bin Ladin's Al Qaida's organisation has ever carried out a hijacking'.[22] In the meantime several aborted attempts were made to kill bin Laden with cruise missile strikes over 1998 and 1999. As one CIA operator later put it 'he should have been a dead man'.[23] The big missed opportunity was not, in hindsight, these CIA operations against Osama bin Laden but rather the Saudi government's consistent refusal to restore his passport and allow him to return to his homeland. An exiled bin Laden was a frustrated menace, a re-settled bin Laden would have been neutered. The unpalatable truth was that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was home to scores of bin Ladens expressing bigoted, anti-Semitic and anti-Western world views, and who channelled funds to dubious organisations. Mostly, the Saudi authorities kept such individuals under control by indirect pressure, or when they went too far and threatened the fragile order of the kingdom, they were incarcerated. It is not too far-fetched to have imagined, at one stage, a reconciled bin Laden ageing in Jeddah, muttering occasional imprecations against 'the Jews and Crusaders' but causing no harm. This option never seems to have been seriously countenanced.

Bin Laden aside, the list of targets the United States might have attacked following September 11 was long. Topping the list of global villains was Iran. Since the 1980s and more than any other country, Iran had backed and supplied terrorist groups that had directly attacked American interests. Between the end of the Vietnam War and the

September 11 attacks, it was Iranian-sponsored terrorists that had killed more Americans than anyone else. These attacks included the massacres in Beirut and, it appears from the balance of evidence, the Khobar Tower truck bombs. Despite this provocation America had been unwilling to engage in military action against Iran, stung perhaps by the Desert One fiasco during the Carter presidency. America's wavering aiming mark never truly settled on Iran, despite Iranian paranoia, and instead becoming distracted by its neighbour Iraq. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks the United States had no reason to suspect the Iranian regime. As shocked as the rest of the world, the Tehran leadership was quick to express its condolences. Remarkably, for the first time in two decades, the traditional 'Death to America' chant was suspended at Friday prayers. Death had come to America in a way that made this ignorant weekly ritual seem completely distasteful, even to Tehran's rulers.

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The next obvious country on America's hit list was Iraq. As with Iran, there was no evidence linking the Ba'athist regime to the attacks in New York. Saddam Hussein was a gangster and buffoon, but he had little truck with terrorist organisations, rightly fearing that any support to subversives might backfire and threaten his own regime. He little helped his case as the Iraqi president was the single international leader who ignorantly applauded the September 11 attacks, foredooming himself to an American response. In cabinet meetings, Paul Wolfowitz emerged as the hawk pushing for punitive action against Saddam Hussein. A leaked e-mail appeared to show that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld – playing the role of a reincarnated John Foster Dulles - also considered attacking Iraq on the spurious grounds that Afghanistan offered few targets worth bombing. In the event both were dissuaded from this course of action, but only for eighteen months.

Afghanistan was the next obvious target - 'not so much a state sponsor of terrorism as it is a state sponsored by terrorists' - as one American official stated.[24] The CIA was well aware the Taliban-held southern half of the country had become home to several jihadist training camps including bin Laden's camp at Tarnak, south of Kandahar. Mullah Omar had been repeatedly asked to hand over bin Laden and to close the camps. He had always refused. Pakistani involvement complicated the picture. Not only was Pakistan offering refuge and a transit point for jihadists, but her Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, the ISI, was providing training and manpower in the Afghan terrorist camps. An attack on Afghanistan would, in one way or other, affect Pakistan.

Saudi Arabia could not be dismissed from the list. American authorities already knew that al-Qaeda was only being sustained by the generous benefaction of wealthy Saudis and Gulf Arabs. The real paymasters of the September 11 attacks were this so-called ‘golden chain’ who had provided bin Laden with millions of dollars of funds, over many years, allowing him to play the Saudi rebel prince in exile. The key to this chain was held by the Saudi security services and despite repeated appeals from American officials, the key was never delivered. The embarrassment of disclosure would have been too great. In a very real sense, bin Laden had mostly acted as a reckless conduit of other people’s money – about $30 million annually, it was later estimated.[25] The post-September 11 world would demonize one man while ignoring the cabals of secretive, wealthy Saudis and others who provided the propellant for bin Laden’s violent trajectory. None of these men would ever be brought to trial.

An indicted terrorist, the Pakistani Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, was another potential candidate. His nephew Younis had been involved in the 1993 attack on the World Trade Centre and the uncle, Mohammed, had been involved in the Manila air plot, a foiled attack that bore similarities to the September 11 attacks. As a result of this plot, the US Attorney General obtained an indictment against ‘KSM’ in 1996, but he escaped to Pakistan after being tipped off by a Qatari government official. During this period, the CIA was establishing its special Osama bin Laden unit. In this respect, ‘KSM’ may have profited from the switch of attention. Had a special ‘KSM Unit’ been set up instead, would the intelligence effort have led the US authorities to the September 11 plot? Did bin Laden play Guy Fawkes to the real phaetons of darkness, Khaled Sheikh Mohammed and the Egyptians?

Assessing ‘KSM’ remains challenging. A large bibliography has grown around a personality like bin Laden, but remarkably, not a single book has been written about the actual mastermind and author of the September 11 attacks: Khaled Sheikh Mohammed. What is known about the individual is ambiguous. ‘KSM’ was a melting pot of contradictory pasts and influences. Born in Kuwait, with Baluchi origins in Iran and Pakistan, he joined the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in his teens but also gained a mechanical engineering degree from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University.[26] He became involved in the Soviet-Afghan war but was sufficiently respectable to be personally recruited by a Qatari minister to act as a project engineer for the water and electricity ministry. Like bin Laden he moved to the Muslim wild west of Afghanistan where it appears the two men met, before finally settling in Karachi. He

appears to have had links with some elements in the Pakistani Army. He was finally arrested in 2003 in Rawalpindi, home of the Pakistani Army. It transpired that he was lodging in the property of a Major Adil Abdul Qudoos. The major and two colonels were eventually convicted of subversion, but the trial revealed that associates of 'KSM', and by implication individuals with links to al-Qaeda, were being put up in Pakistani Army hostelries.[27] It was in Khaled Sheikh Mohammed's head that the schemes which eventually crystallized into the September 11 attacks were distilled. And it was 'KSM' who approached 'UBL', probably attracted by bin Laden's wealth. For his part, it appears bin Laden was initially lukewarm over the whole business of attacking North America. It was the Egyptian Mohammed Atef, one of bin Laden's subordinates, who convinced the latter to support Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, after the initial non-committal response. Gauging KSM also has to overcome the problem that his eventual capture and interrogations (which included 183 water boardings), revealed him to be a vainglorious man making probably false boasts. His broken English in public testimonies has added to the difficulties of understanding the mind of this mass murderer. The little information that has emerged from his incarceration in Guantanamo suggests he is somewhat in the mould of characters like Abu Nidal, driven by pathological hatreds and a willingness to commit acts of mass murder. Was there sufficient evidence, at the time, to lead American justice to Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, still living semi-clandestinely in Pakistan, rather than to bin Laden?[28] If there was it was overtaken by an avalanche of anger directed at the popular hate figure Osama bin Laden.

Lastly, there was a bewildering federation of radical Islamic groups – literally hundreds – which existed long before bin Laden's rise to prominence. Many of these fanatics were hosted, or lived clandestinely, in various Muslim countries: Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, and Eritrea, to name just the principal countries. Too many had been encouraged, trained and armed by the KGB during the Cold War, when supporting 'liberation movements' had become a way of undermining American 'neo-colonialism'. Bin Laden did not set a match to radical Islamism. He joined a very, very long queue. Mostly, Western governments disregarded these groups, except when attacks spiked and affected the lives of their citizens (such as the spate of terrorism in the 1970s). Certainly, no Western governments spoke of 'failed states', 'non-state actors', 'asymmetric warfare', or invoked all the other blather that would become synonymous with a 'global war on terrorism', still less proposed invading countries in response to terrorist attacks. Terrorism, Islamist or otherwise, was a background noise, no more, not a reason to overturn the world order.

The hijackers themselves offered no obvious target for a retaliatory attack. Who should the United States make pay, as President Bush vowed, when the hijackers included Saudi Arabians, an Egyptian, a Gulf State Arab, and a Lebanese national. Fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudi Arabians. This group included two sets of brothers, the Hazmis and the Shehris. They were abetted wittingly and unwittingly by more Saudi Arabians, Moroccans, Yemenis, Jordanians and Gulf Arabs. By numbers alone, the provenance of the hijackers laid the guilt on Saudi Arabia's doorstep, but the Kingdom was an ally not an enemy.

The finger of blame, it seems, was always going to point at Osama bin Laden. The Arab on the street also assumed bin Laden's culpability. Palestinians cheered the attacks. In Pakistan there were marches in support of the attacks. Although bin Laden's complicity could not be confirmed it is notable that he was judged the prime suspect so quickly. It subsequently emerged the intelligence agencies were not far off the mark although their portrayal of al-Qaeda was distorted. Perhaps the person who would gain a more nuanced understanding of the group of jihadists that came to be known as 'al-Qaeda' was a professor of religious studies at the University of California at Davis, Flagg Miller. The heroic Miller, over a period of seven years, deciphered and translated 1,500 audio tapes recovered by a CNN crew from bin Laden's home in Kandahar, later handed over to US authorities. The lack of interest in the tapes from the intelligence services (they were eventually deposited in a research library in Yale) was misplaced. Miller's study, which eventually became the basis of a book, *Sounding Out Al-Qa`ida: Islamic Militancy, Asceticism, and the Bin Laden Phenomenon through Osama's Own Audiotape Collection*, cast doubts on many orthodoxies. Bin Laden, as some argued at the time, was principally driven by traditional, internecine Muslim quarrels, not by hatred against the West. America was a distant, proxy enemy. Other Western powers, like Britain, were not even a serious consideration. This portrait would be confirmed in the handful of letters released by the US government following his death. His status as emir was not given and his followers were contingent and relatively few. Bin Laden only finally informed the al-Qaeda shura council of the 'planes operation' in August 2001, but this body objected to an attack against America. This suggests that bin Laden was not an all-powerful figure within the organisation. Even so, it is unlikely the shura council's objection would have made any difference as Khaled Sheik Mohammed was essentially a freelancer who was using al-Qaeda's resources - specifically bin Laden's contacts and funds - to further his own plans. By this late stage it is highly unlikely the attacks would have been called off. In this respect, it is not strictly accurate to assert that 'al-Qeada' was responsible for the

September 11 attacks – if the shura had had its way, there would have been no attacks.

Money seems to have won him friends. Disturbingly, Miller concluded that poor government-contracted translations of bin Laden material had led to misinterpretations of the movement (the employment of Lebanese Christian Maronites has been suggested as a reason for this weakness). This was only a partially justified criticism. Contemporary intelligence reporting of al-Qaeda, as the *9/11 Commission Report* later revealed, referred to the individual, or to his 'associates' or to his business 'network', not to an al-Qaeda. The notion of an al-Qaeda *organisation*, rather than a loose and shifting alliance of like-minded people, came afterwards, as we have seen. In this respect, the argument that al-Qaeda was later dismantled by America's military response and became hydra-headed, was over-stated. The network was always diffuse, decentralised, and based on transient personal relations.

Afghanistan as the omphalos of evil was also over-stated. An attack involving hijacked aircraft was almost certainly conceived in Karachi in the early 1990s. This was also where the selected 'pilots' received their tradecraft training and elementary training on flight simulators before proceeding to America to undertake flight training. The radicalisation of the suicide attackers crucially took place in Saudi Arabia. For many years the Saud kingdom had been fermenting and exporting an extremist, intolerant and potentially explosive Islamic world view, necessarily tolerated by the West. In the first decade of the 21st century this ideology finally detonated, with terrible consequences for the Arab world. For the suicide attackers, the *casus belli* was not America or even Israel, it was Chechnya. The lead September 11 attackers had been attempting to reach the Caucasus to take part in the jihadist war against Russia. It was the successful blocking of the smuggling routes into Chechnya that led to the diversion into Afghanistan. There was accident not deliberate planning. The later justification that British troops were fighting in Afghanistan to keep Britain safe from terrorism never acknowledged that the terrorism had been geographically dispersed from the beginning. Afghanistan was everybody else's accidental transit point, not the root of the terrorism. The root was in Pakistan, where Khaled Sheikh Mohammed was based, and it was the meddling and encouragement of Pakistan's intelligence services that was decisive in establishing clandestine camps in Afghanistan. At one stage there were scores of such Pakistani-sponsored terrorist camps, known to Western as well as the Indian intelligence services, but nobody confronted Pakistan over this matter. If any country has the claim to be the geographical locus of the September 11 attacks it is Pakistan, not Afghanistan. The ideological locus, indisputably, is the Kingdom

of Saudi Arabia.

Whether or not Osama bin Laden can be considered the terrorist mastermind of the September 11 attacks, there can be no serious doubts that he was heavily implicated. Bin Laden did provide funds to jihadist and terrorist organisations, including Khaled Sheikh Mohammed. He did set up training camps in Afghanistan that acted as incubators for jihadists. He actively groomed the young men who became the September 11 hijackers. He provided ideological inspiration and a conduit for anti-American vitriol. He was cognisant and approved of the attacks. He encouraged Khaled Sheikh Mohammed to complete the operation. The Saudi hijackers themselves felt they were undertaking a martyrdom operation for 'Sheikh Osama'. For these reasons, it is with sound justification that within days of the attacks, Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and Afghanistan became the main targets.

What surprised was that a man so loudly bent on attacking America should have so equally loudly denied any involvement in the attacks. Five days after the attacks, a bin Laden statement was broadcast on Al Jazeera television denying culpability. Amazingly, for someone so full of puff, Osama bin Laden showed no desire to claim authorship for the most spectacular terrorist attack in history. If one of the subsidiary aims of the attacks was to enhance his reputation, this seemed remarkable coyness (a significant segment of the Arab world was celebrating him as a hero anyway, and jihadist recruiting boomed).

Two interviews followed: the first with the Al Jazeera journalist, Taysor Allouni, and the second with the Saudi cleric Ali al-Ghandi. In the former he justified the attacks on the United States in a long-winded ramble. In the latter he indicated that he knew when and where the attacks were going to take place (remarking that he had expected three or four floors to collapse, not the whole buildings). It was not until 2004, against the background of a US presidential election, that bin Laden broadcast a statement fully admitting knowledge but not responsibility for the September 11 attacks.[29] Osama bin Laden, in fact, would never claim credit or responsibility for the 'holy Tuesday operations', but the United States government, and still less American public opinion, would never accept that he might just be telling the truth. Despite the leaking of hundreds of Guantanamo prisoner reports and scores of subsequent interviews with people who may be considered primary sources to the events, no coherent account has ever emerged describing how bin Laden planned, master-minded and directed the September 11 attacks. The most plausible explanation is that he just didn't. It *was* the work of Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, abetted principally by his associate Ramzi bin al-Shib. Bin Laden had good reason not to be too

closely associated with this gross provocation of the United States. He had assured his host Mullah Omar that he would do nothing to endanger the Taliban regime. The fact that he refrained from informing the al-Qaeda shura until the eleventh hour suggests he knew there would be objections. It is possible that in bin Laden's illogical reckoning he was not responsible – he had merely provided some funds (a mere $10,000 in expenses according to a later confession by Khaled Sheikh Mohammed), offered some training facilities, and made suggestions of suitable recruits for somebody else's idea.[30] The CIA's original assessment of bin Laden may have been accurate all along – ultimately, he had been 'an extremist financier' albeit with a bombastic self-promoting strategy.

The September 11 attacks were estimated to have cost between $400,000 and $500,000 (the hijackers spent $270,000 in the United States). Where the money came from – that is, who sponsored the attacks – has never been satisfactorily established. One of the largest single sources was Khaled Sheikh Mohammed's cousin, Ali Abdul Aziz Ali, who transferred $114,500 to the 'Hamburg Cell' for flight training. Another source was a UAE bank account run by a Saudi accountant named Mustafa Ahmed al-Hawsawi. Bin Laden's chief of staff, the Palestinian Zein-al-Abideen (Abu Zubaydah) appears to have acted as a go-between. The provenance of these funds is a mystery.[31] It may be argued with some confidence that Osama bin Laden was not the only or even principal bankroller.

In the aftermath of September 11 such equivocating would have fallen on deaf ears. Osama bin Laden became the most wanted criminal on earth because America needed a bogeyman. Hot on the heels of American revenge was a media machine stoking a good cop versus bad guy story. The problem with the rush to kill or capture Osama bin Laden was that America was proposing to do this by invading a country and toppling its regime - and Article 5 of the NATO charter had just been invoked. The soon-to-be announced Operation Enduring Freedom would drag NATO to war, or not quite. As the US Department of Defense (DOD) fully understood, only a handful of NATO partners could actually be counted on to fight a war. From this short list, perhaps only one or two had useful military capabilities. One of these countries with a potentially useful military capability was Britain. The day after the attacks a single DC-10 flew heads of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), MI5 and GCHQ to Washington DC, one of the few aircraft allowed to fly over American airspace in the immediate aftermath of September 11. Nine days later the President of the United States held a telephone conference with the British Prime Minister. The subject of the conference was the forthcoming war and Britain's participation in that war. Blair responded to the tocsin calls by making thirty-seven trips

and flying 40,000 miles over the next eight weeks, drumming up support for the war. If a single period were needed in the aftermath of September 11 to highlight Britain's status as America's dependable military ally, this was it.

The conference also marked the beginning of one of the most unlikely political alliances between two contrasting world leaders. Bush was an ineloquent Texan Republican, prone to gaffes and with little experience of foreign affairs. He read little and preferred to receive information through verbal briefs. He painfully lacked the charisma and oratory of his predecessor, hiding instead behind a bluff, joking persona that sometimes verged on smirking idiot. His values were Christian and conservative. His appeal to voters was uncomplicated – if you voted for Bush you voted for God and America. There was also a hint – at least before the September 11 attacks – that Bush Junior was developing into one of the laziest presidents in history. The number of days he was spending in his ranch in Crawford, Texas, rather than at his office in Washington, did not go unnoticed. His British counterpart could hardly have been more different. Tony Blair was the young, energetic leader of a reformed socialist party: New Labour. He played rock guitar, swept away the fusty Conservatives, and ushered in a period of 'Cool Britannia'. This domestic frivolity belied an enthusiastic and serious appetite for foreign affairs. Tony Blair's wide smile became one his signature features but he was not a Prime Minister afraid to bare fangs and go to war.

The two leaders became conjoined by a shared messianic belief that military force can be a force for good – the phrase that became the Ministry of Defence's official motto during the Blair premiership. Daily reminders of the purpose of military power spread across the government department in hundreds of posters, corporate mugs and mouse mats. To hold the belief that military force can do 'good' required a suspension of the messy realities of warfare, as well as a naïve and simplified world view. Both leaders trumpeted such simplicities leaving the details and the unpleasantness of actually running wars successfully to subordinates. Churchill's warning that the national leader who gives the signal for war 'no longer becomes the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events' was never truer than in the Bush-Blair partnership.

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The September 11 attacks gave wind to the so-called Blair Doctrine, a phrase coined by the media rather than by the Prime Minister. This doctrine, such as it existed, offered a world-view so simple and persuasive that it would be uncritically adopted by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government in 2010. The ideas that informed the doctrine

had already fermented in the Prime Minister's mind when he spoke on 22 April 1999, at the Economic Club in Chicago, at the height of the Kosovo conflict. Five criteria for 'a more active and interventionist role in solving the world's problems', crucially outside UN auspices, were posited: be sure of your case, exhaust all other options, ask if military operations can be reasonably prosecuted, prepare for the long-term, and confirm that national interest is at stake. Reportedly, these criteria actually originated from Professor Lawrence Freedman at King's College, but whatever their provenance, they would be anyway ironically ignored in the subsequent invasion of Iraq. The key point about this doctrine was that it had a humanitarian impulse. This chimed with Foreign Secretary Robin Cook who had entered office with a determination to pursue an ethical foreign policy. It also linked with the 1998 Strategic Defence Review which cast the armed forces as a force for good. Blair did genuinely and honourably seek a more effective international mechanism for resolving humanitarian crises, and the personal investment he made in these ideas would eventually bear fruit in the UN-endorsed concept of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

The doctrine received its fullest expression in a speech delivered in Banqueting Hall shortly after the attacks, but by now its foundation had subtly changed.

'What is clear is that 11 September has not just given impetus and urgency to such solutions, it has opened the world up…one illusion has been shattered on 11 September: that we can have the good life of the West irrespective of the state of the rest of the world…Once chaos and strife have got a grip on a region or a country trouble will soon be exported.'

Dealing with this anticipated export of 'trouble', in practice, meant the dispatch of military forces to faraway lands before 'they' do 'harm to us'. This policy may have had merit if it in any way reflected Britain's military capabilities, which it unfortunately did not, and if it was not fatally weakened by a supreme disregard over whether such interventions would actually work. The formula was so self-servingly justified, so apparently above the necessity for debate, that, in effect, there was none. The last half century had witnessed an exceedingly long roll-call of chaos, strife and 'failed states', none of which had led to any harm being done to 'us'. Nor was it evident in 2001 that any state, or more pertinently 'non-state actor', to use the modern euphemism, was threatening Britain. To live in Britain at the beginning of the 21st century was to live in a totally unthreatened country and one of the safest in the world. No intelligence agency uncovered any Islamist terrorist plots against Britain in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks for

the simple reason that there were none. These considerations were swept aside by the armada of billowing words. The world had to be fixed and no corner was beyond the reach of the Blair broom: the Middle East, Africa, Russia and the United Nations. If this was ‘Utopian’, the Prime Minister was unapologetic. ‘So let us seize the chance of this time’, he told the audience of City worthies, ‘future generations will not forgive us if we fail’, sentiments so grotesquely ironic it seems harsh to point out that he would both fail and leave behind a wake of angry Britons wholly unprepared to forgive him the chaos he helped trigger. How did this shift happen, from humanitarian interventions to pre-emptive, aggressive actions?

America’s plan for toppling the Taliban regime, which Britain would be invited to join, was a dusted-off variant of a scheme devised by the CIA under the Clinton presidency. Broadly, it involved two planks: first, the Taliban would be classed as a terrorist regime and ostracised in international forums; and second, funds would be channelled to the Taliban’s arch enemy, the Northern Alliance, who would topple the regime with American military assistance.[32] Ironically, American officials had previously kept the Northern Alliance at arms length, partly to appease Pakistan, and partly because this confederation of Tajiks, Uzbeks and others was viewed as a minority grouping unlikely to ever wield power in a predominantly Pashtun Afghanistan. Now the hillbillies of the north were a key ally. This plan reflected a complimentary shift in doctrine across the Atlantic - the very real Bush Doctrine - or America’s right to act pre-emptively against potential enemies, which in fact had roots in a cauldron of ideas generated in the fall days of the Clinton presidency. The Clinton-era Operations Infinite Reach and Infinite Resolve thus readily mutated into Operation Enduring Freedom and ultimately a ‘Global War on Terrorism’.[33]

It was this intersection of ideas – both interventionist - that transformed Blair’s original impulses and fixed London’s support for Washington. The Blair Doctrine had been about doing something to resolve an existing humanitarian crisis; the Bush Doctrine was about acting pre-emptively and aggressively against an imagined, possible future threat. These were two quite different ideas but as no British government dare challenge an American orthodoxy, it was a matter of inevitability that a British Prime Minister would end up adopting, or at least partnering, the Bush Doctrine. That Blair believed in these imagined threats made the switch easy.

What emerged from this coincidence of Anglo-Saxon interventionist impulses was a jihadist domino theory, articulated with religious certainty in Washington, and chanted by London. Fifty years had passed since Eisenhower made an allusion to falling dominos,

long enough for two generations to forget how the thrall of this monolithic idea had led America into a tragic communion with Indochina. Now the dominos were revived. If terrorists and their supporters were not dealt with, wherever they harboured, then it was just a question of time before the dominos would fall, and Western cities would be under attack. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, who would have questioned this canon, any more than question the Red menace in the 1950s?

The missed opportunity, from the American perspective, was that none of these earlier contingency operations had as their main aim the capture of an individual. The Pentagon would have done better to tear up all the old plans and ask the question: what do we need to do to capture or kill Osama bin Laden? A plan may have emerged quite different to Operation Enduring Freedom. Regardless, America was riding on an unprecedented wave of world sympathy. American officials could and would get almost all the cooperation needed to bring to justice the presumed perpetrators of the September 11 attacks – but the bank of goodwill, in a world of realpolitik, would start emptying from the moment the account opened.

What exactly would Britain's role be within the inevitable American military response? On 4 October, Geoff Hoon returned to the House of Commons to present the answer to this question. He opened with a forgivable error of fact. It was clear, he asserted, that at least six thousand people had been killed in the September 11 attacks, an exaggeration that doubled the body count. Somewhere between 14,000 and 17,000 people had in fact entered the Twin Towers that morning – it was in the end miraculous that more people had indeed not been killed. Although it was not known at the time, Britain had suffered the most fatalities, after American nationals. Sixty-seven Britons lost their lives, including two brothers from Ipswich, Andrew and Timothy Gilbert who worked for the same financial firm.

Hoon's warning was clear: 'The time for forceful military action against Usama bin Laden, his associates, and, if they do not act, those who support them, is coming'.[34] In turn, Britain would do whatever was required to support an American military campaign: 'We have made it clear to our US allies that we will offer them every assistance in the action they take'. This was not, as it happened, empty rhetoric. There was a real eagerness, even over-eagerness to demonstrate the useful military contribution that Britain could make. This sincere willingness to support the American cause was matched by an equally real fear that British military assistance would be spurned, or that a token contribution would be accepted, but no more. It was a remarkable measure of the unequal nature of the

Anglo-American partnership at the beginning of the 21st century that the government should be agitated on this point. American indifference to a possible British military contribution was not entirely misplaced. The political value of an Anglo-American coalition escaped no one, but within the Pentagon there were individuals who did not rate the contribution of a middle-sized power with down-sized, under-resourced armed forces. Over time, American diffidence towards its allies would change, but in the winter of 2001 Britain represented political fig-leaf, not serious military muscle.

If Hoon made it clear that Britain was prepared to go to war over this matter, he left the details of Britain's military contribution and the likely missions that British forces might undertake deliberately vague. The important point was to express solidarity with the United States. Attention then turned to the 20,000 strong force in the Middle East including almost all of 3 Commando Brigade, participating in Exercise Swift Sword. This naval task force, commanded by Rear Admiral James Burnell-Nugent, included the aircraft carrier HMS *Illustrious* and the amphibious transport HMS *Fearless*, with escorts provided by HMS *Cornwall* and HMS *Southampton.* The task force also included two submarines HMS *Trafalgar* and HMS *Triumph* as well as seven support ships. Crucially, the two submarines were armed with American Tomahawk missiles. Around fifty RAF aircraft in various roles were also taking part in the exercise.

How would the task force be used? On this point, the Defence Secretary could not help indulging in some party-politicking:

'The Strategic Defence Review leaves us well placed to take on and defeat international terrorism. We have significantly improved capabilities - reconnaissance, intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, precision strike, rapid deployment, and sophisticated command and control - all of which will play their part in the campaign against international terrorism.'[35]

This cheerleading was for a domestic audience. No American senior officer, after the embarrassing British performance in Kosovo, believed him. Within eighteen months the boast would sound very hollow after a British Army division was stalled for three weeks outside Basra by a small number of lightly armed Ba'athists, even as two American divisions advanced 500 kilometres north, swatting all opposition.

American scepticism over the value of the British maritime task force off the coast of Oman was more than well-founded. The aircraft carrier and amphibious transport were old and in constant need of maintenance. A joke circulated that HMS *Illustrious* should be re-

named HMS *Impediment* because she offered little real military capability and got in the way of larger American carriers. The sixteen Sea Harriers she was carrying were just for show. None of the deficiencies highlighted in Kosovo had been addressed and the aircraft did not have the range to reach Afghanistan anyway without multiple refuels. Plans would be hurriedly made to replace them with helicopters that might at least offer some utility. The RAF was little better placed to support an American-led war in Afghanistan. In the end, the only support American planners requested was tankers (because of an incompatibility between US Air Force and US Navy refuel nozzles which British tanker aircraft could overcome). The RAF would be reduced to acting as service stations in the sky for American aircraft. The vaunted reconnaissance capability which the Defence Secretary alluded to rested on the Canberra, an aircraft about to be retired after half a century in service. There were no credible plans to replace this museum piece. The intelligence, surveillance and target acquisition capability rested on two variants of the Nimrod, an aircraft that was patched up dangerously during the Falklands Conflict, and eventually exploded over the skies of Afghanistan with the loss of fourteen lives. The replacement aircraft, another Nimrod variant, was sitting on drawing boards and developing into another procurement scandal. The claimed precision strike capability was also not credible. When British forces rolled into Iraq in 2003, the RAF would still be waiting for an adequate precision strike capability to support ground troops. Unwilling to cause civilian casualties, pilots resorted to lobbing inert concrete bombs, a plainly useless gesture. The ‘sophisticated command and control’ supposedly enjoyed by Britain’s armed forces was a Byzantine mess of ageing systems that could not keep up with the pace of modern warfare. One of the reasons why Britain’s armed forces *had* to operate under an American umbrella was precisely because they lacked the information technology systems to operate coherently. About the only element of the British task force which the Pentagon could rely on was the ever-dependable Royal Marines. The remainder of the capabilities that the Defence Secretary claimed simply did not stand up to military scrutiny. The truth was that Britain was ill-prepared for war and the Americans knew it.

There was another reason why Hoon could offer little detail on the forthcoming military operations in Afghanistan: D-Day was only three days away. American military planners had worked over-time following the September 11 attacks, and at the heart of their efforts was Donald Rumsfeld’s vision of ‘war lite’. This would not be a war fought by a great army manoeuvring tanks, artillery and great logistic trains across the plains of Afghanistan. Building up such a force and projecting it to land-locked Afghanistan would have presented insuperable problems even with American transport resources. Neighbours

– Russia, Pakistan and Iran – would have fretted. The entire operation would have taken much longer eroding the momentum that had been created following the September 11 attacks. As importantly, American public opinion wanted swift revenge. President Bush, initially criticised for his reaction in the immediate wake of the attacks, was eager to atone for early hesitancy and deliver that revenge. Operation Enduring Freedom would be a war fought by around 350 special force soldiers and by American air power.[36] Among this special force contingent would be troopers from 22 SAS and marines from the SBS, the former a regiment for which the Americans had regard. These soldiers would be the only British servicemen invited to join the American show.

On 7 October, at one o'clock in the afternoon, Eastern Daylight Time, President Bush announced the initiation of military operations:

'Every nation has a choice to make. In this conflict, there is no neutral ground. If any government sponsors the outlaws and killers of innocents, they have become outlaws and murderers, themselves. And they will take that lonely path at their own peril. The battle is now joined on many fronts. We will not waver; we will not tire; we will not falter; and we will not fail. Peace and freedom will prevail.'[37]

Reaching for the political fig leaf that this was a coalition operation, and not just an example of the American super-power wielding its club, Bush took special care to mention 'the staunch friend, Great Britain'.[38] The staunch friend duly obliged by launching a salvo of American-built Tomahawk missiles from HMS *Trafalgar* and HMS *Triumph*, at H-Hour, at targets supplied by American intelligence. Five days later a second salvo was fired, after which British stocks were exhausted.

CHAPTER 2
INTERNATIONAL RESCUE
AFGHANISTAN 2001 - 2005

Operation Enduring Freedom was a strange war, as strange as the war in Kosovo that preceded it. The collapse of the Taliban regime was precipitous, an indication of the fragility of the movement and the wider bankruptcy of the Afghan state. Air strikes started on 7 October and just over one month later the victorious Northern Alliance was walking into an undefended Kabul. One American soldier was killed by enemy action. The Taliban mostly fled to their southern hinterlands. Pakistani fighters re-crossed the border to the safety of the ungoverned tribal areas. The Arab foreign legion skulked away to the mountainous Tora Bora region of eastern Afghanistan. With them retreated Osama bin Laden. He fled in such haste that a television crew guided by locals was able to film his hastily abandoned town house, noting among other domestic details the large supply of medicines that Osama bin Laden appeared to be taking.[39] Soon after the investment of Kabul, Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun chosen by Washington to lead a re-founded Afghanistan, was appointed the unelected chairman of an 'Afghanistan Interim Administration'. Within six months, the Pentagon would kill or capture sixteen of twenty-five al-Qaeda leaders, and twenty-one of twenty-seven Taliban leaders on its most wanted list.[40]

How did America succeed so stunningly? At the time, success seemed far from assured with many commentators predicting that Washington would be sucked into an Afghan quagmire, like the Soviets before them. These warnings were not without foundation. American soldiers were effectively joining a civil war that had been in progress for over five years without resolution (or since 1973, taking the longer view). The two opposing sides were a hotchpotch of alliances and misalliances, each with competing aims and a tendency to switch sides when conditions changed. About the only certainties in this civil war were the implacable hatred between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance and the fact that neither side had the clout to win the war. The Pentagon itself, it appears, had doubts, with some planners anticipating that the proposed special force war would fail and that 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions would have to sort out the mess.[41]

The Taliban offensive that swept the movement to power in 1996 had failed to entirely defeat the confederation of tribes collected under the banner of the Northern Alliance

under the leadership of the charismatic Shah Ahmad Massoud. Three static fronts had emerged with fixed defensive lines. About fifty kilometres north of Kabul on the Shomali plain, Massoud permanently deployed a few thousand fighters to protect the gateway to the Panshir valley, the heartland of the Northern Alliance and the scene of bitter fighting during the Soviet-Afghan War. A second front was held at Takhar. Overall, Massoud could possibly count on as many as 10,000 fighters during the summer fighting season on these two fronts. That particular summer Massoud's irregular army had been significantly strengthened by a regiment's worth of T-55 tanks and BMP-1 armoured personnel carriers, sold to the Northern Alliance by their former enemy, the Russians, who now viewed the prospect of Taliban on their borders with some nervousness.[42] The vehicles were serviced and in good working order. The Taliban's fleet of former Russian vehicles, by contrast, was dilapidated and mostly unserviceable. Neither side knew how to conduct armoured warfare – tanks were mainly used as pill-boxes with large guns – but the fact that the Northern Alliance's vehicles actually worked would be an important factor in their eventual advance to Taloqan and Kunduz in the west, and Kabul in the south.

A third front existed in an enclave at Darrah-e Suf, south of the Uzbek city Mazar-e Sharif. After the capture and ransacking of Mazar-e Sharif by the Taliban, Abdul Rashid Dostum, the notorious Uzbek warlord, had fled to exile in Turkey. In the spring of 2001, Massoud had enticed the moustachioed general back to Afghanistan with the promise of a triple alliance between Dostum's own men; the Shia Islamic Unity Party (*Shia Hizb-i-Wahdat Islami*) led by a man named Mohammed Mohaqqeq; and Massoud's lieutenant in the area, Ustaz Atta Mohammed.[43] It was a typical Afghan arrangement. The persecuted Shias wanted security, Dostum wanted to regain his old fiefdom, and Massoud wanted reinforcements in his war against the Taliban. This alliance proved especially successful, tipping the balance against the Taliban who looked certain to eventually squeeze and defeat the defenders of the Darrah-e Suf enclave.

It was to these three fronts that American and British special force detachments deployed over the next two weeks following the initiation of the ground war, apparently based on a long-standing CIA plan known as the 'Blue Sky Memo'.[44] What they found was a rag-bag of militias, each owing allegiance to their immediate commander, full of fight but without the means to break the deadlock on the front lines. The stalemate could only be broken by American air power, but this was being used to pursue a classic air campaign against strategic rather than tactical targets. That the planners of the air campaign chose to fall back on a template first used in the Gulf War, later refined in the

Kosovo War, betrayed a lack of understanding of the true situation on the ground. There were very few strategic targets of any worth in Afghanistan, and these posed no threat to American forces anyway. On the first day of the air campaign sixteen air strikes were conducted against SAM sites, twelve were conducted against airfields, and four were conducted against command and control centres.[45] There were no SAM launches in response to these strikes and there never would be: the missiles had long-stopped being operational. Nor was there any attempt by the 'Taliban air force' to challenge American air supremacy. The handfuls of old Soviet aircraft in Afghanistan were mostly a menace to the equally small number of Afghan pilots who knew how to fly them and who dared risk their necks in the obsolete machines. These strategic targets could have been totally ignored and the outcome of the war would not have been altered. By day five the number of missions flown against SAM sites, airfields and command centres had dwindled to zero – there was nothing left to attack.[46]

It was not just the categories of targets being attacked which suggested a flawed strategy. Where the missions were being conducted also raised questions. On the first day of the air campaign eight targets were struck in Kandahar, hundreds of kilometres away from the front lines. Sixteen missions were flown against targets in Kabul and Jalalabad, also far from the fronts in the north. Just one mission was flown in support of the Northern Alliance in Kunduz. Massoud's men would have to wait a further six days before the next mission. In fact, in the first two weeks of the war, just five strikes were conducted in Kunduz, compared to fifty-seven in Kandahar.[47] In total, about 85 per cent of all air strikes conducted between 7 October and 21 October were against American rather than Afghan targets, and they were nowhere near the front lines.[48] The frustration at American targeting was such that in an improbable twist, Iranian intelligence began to feed the CIA with grid references of worthwhile Taliban targets, pleased to see these former enemies get their come-uppance at the hands of the Americans. The frustration was also being felt by America's new found ally, the Northern Alliance. The few air strikes called to support the militias on the front lines generally involved a pair of aircraft dropping a handful of bombs. The war was never going to be won at this pace and criticism of the war plan became vocal. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld began to manifest frustration with his service chiefs. America needed to demonstrate progress on the ground.

On 30 October the US theatre commander-in-chief General Tommy Franks travelled to Dushanbe and held meetings with representatives of the Northern Alliance.[49] The outcomes from this meeting were immediate. More special force detachments were

deployed to the front lines and the air campaign switched decisively in support of the ground war. The three Taliban fronts at Taloqan, Mazar-e Sharif and Shomali were all targeted. Mazar-e Sharif, in particular, received the brunt of the American bombing effort. In the first week of November, two thirds of all bombs landed on the Taliban front lines encircling this city.[50] Converting this expenditure of high explosives into tangible results on the ground, however, was not without military and political ramifications.

The two opposing sides could probably muster in excess of 5,000 fighters. The Taliban had the problem of trying to subdue the enclave at Darrah-e-Suf, which drained manpower and resources. But the Northern Alliance had the bigger problem of trying to coordinate the actions of four different militias: Dostum's Uzbek fighters gathered under the banner of *Jombesh-i-Milli* (the National Movement); Massoud's Tajik fighters fighting under the *Jamiat* flag; and two Iranian-backed Shia militias, the *Hizb-i-Wahdat* and the *Harakat-i-Islami*. American focus on Mazar-e Sharif was driven by both political and military considerations. After two decades of bending to Pakistani sensibilities in the region, Washington was still finding it hard to get tough with Pakistan's rulers. The Taliban were Pakistan's client. The capture of Kabul and the de-throning of Mullah Omar were still viewed with horror by many Pakistani officials, unable to accept that these would be the inevitable consequences of the Taliban refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden. The latter's eventual escape would, in part, be the result of Pakistani fretting over American intentions in Afghanistan and Washington's sensitivity to these concerns. In this sense, the military campaign was hobbled from the outset and its primary objective – the capture or killing of Osama bin Laden – was always likely to have been difficult.[51] The capture of the Uzbek Mazar-e Sharif, never a Taliban city anyway, was much less likely to stir Islamabad.

The military justification for assaulting Mazar-e Sharif first was also clear. Here, the Taliban were at their most stretched point. They enjoyed no popular support, indeed they were hated, and the winter weather was beginning to set in, creating miserable conditions in the trenches. Without the stiffening of foreign fighters, especially Pakistanis, it was possible this front would have collapsed anyway, without American support. With American air power and Dostum's enthusiastic Uzbek fighters, the Taliban stood little chance.

The final important reason for putting pressure on the Mazar-e Sharif front was that leading elements of 10th Mountain Division had been flown to Uzbekistan, just across the border, over the last two weeks of October. If Mazar-e Sharif collapsed, these troops would be able to cross into Afghanistan, unimpeded, using the Hieratan land bridge. The

city also had a functioning airport, a not unimportant consideration in a country with a devastated infrastructure.

The Northern Alliance had already attempted to take the city in the third week of October but failed. On 4 November, the offensive resumed. The following day, after a brief but violent battle, Keshendeh fell to Dostum's fighters on horseback. In a bold gesture, Uzbek cavalry at one point charged Taliban T-55 tanks, an assault witnessed by amazed and impressed American Green Berets.[52] The day after the fall of Keshendeh, Ak Kupruk was captured by Atta Mohammed's Tajik brigade. This too proved a tough fight, with the Taliban at first unwilling to cede ground. The two forces now linked up and advanced northwards towards the town of Shulgarah. Moving at a slower pace but adding pressure to the already weakening Taliban hold on Mazar-e Sharif, Shia militias were also beginning to advance on the city. To block the assault, the Taliban had to hold two important gorges, the Shulgarah Gorge and the Tangi Cheshmah-e-Shifa, both of which they failed to do. Once again, the combination of American bombs and Uzbek cavalry charges proved too strong. Five days after the offensive started, the loose coalition of tribesmen fighting under the Northern Alliance banner entered the city of Mazar-e Sharif. It was late evening, and the Taliban used the darkness to scatter, leaving behind all their heavy equipment. At last the joint American-Northern Alliance war had its first real success on the ground. In a symbolic gesture, several pieces of the World Trade Centre were buried in the city.[53]

The fall of Mazar-e Sharif exposed the weakness of the Taliban military organisation. This was never an army in a conventional sense and Taliban commanders displayed only the most rudimentary ideas on how to fight a mobile or coordinated battle. Once the trench lines were penetrated there was no attempt to reorganise or reform defensive lines. It was as if the Taliban were playing by a medieval set of rules. The beaten side retreated from the field of battle and laid low. Some Taliban fled east and some to Kunduz, but the majority drifted to Kholm from where they were able to continue their retreat southward. The lack of resistance was evident in the low casualties. Only small pockets of Taliban, in the end, fought to the death in Mazar-e Sharif.[54] Many more, mostly Pakistani prisoners were slaughtered outright in revenge killings. This was not just an army in retreat; this was an army without a stomach for the fight.

The lack of fight seemed to deepen with Taliban equivocation over the entire rationale for the war. Mullah Omar had never sought confrontation with the United States, a country he knew nothing about and whose emissaries he never met because they were not

Muslims. The war came to Mullah Omar because of his misjudged stance over Osama bin Laden. More world-travelled Afghans in the Taliban government could see the brewing storm and were unhappy over its predictable consequences. Nobody, it seems, was able or willing to persuade Mullah Omar to change his mind. When the storm broke, self-survival took over and most chose to seek shelter rather than brave the elements.

The collapse of Mazar-e Sharif produced a snowball effect which caught everyone by surprise. The day after the fall of Mazar-e Sharif, Dostum captured his old fiefdoms of Shiberghan, Saripul and Maimanah where the British would later set up a temporary base. Qala Nao fell soon afterwards. Within a week, Dostum was celebrating his return to scenic Bamiyan where two famous Buddhist statues carved into a cliff face had been destroyed by the Taliban. Again the Taliban fled offering no resistance. When Kabul collapsed a week later to Tajik forces led by Fahim Khan, it was journalists scrabbling to keep up with the Northern Alliance columns who beat American forces to the city. In western Afghanistan, Ismail Khan, another Tajik, seized Herat.

Taliban forces, such as they existed as a coherent army, were now split between elements trapped in Kunduz trying desperately to find escape routes south, a larger force encamped north of Kabul on the Shomali Plain, and an encircled group on the Takhar front. It was this latter entrapped group that now felt the vengeful ire of the Northern Alliance. Following a two day fight, against mainly foreign fighters, the city of Taloqan fell. This was a sweet prize for Massoud's men and it was swiftly followed by the capture of a ribbon of towns across north-east Afghanistan. Several hundred prisoners were then packed into ISO containers and transported to Jawzjan. Nobody knows the true figure, but many suffocated to death. Another unknown number were summarily executed at Shibergan, events that were quickly glossed over.

In the wake of these operations there occurred an episode which revealed the depth of support given by Pakistan to the Taliban. It was not just Mullah Omar or bin Laden who failed to foresee that America would launch a ground invasion, and prevail swiftly. The Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, the ISI, also seemed to get caught out. Scores of Pakistani intelligence officials and army officers now found themselves trapped in the Kunduz pocket and facing almost certain death. General Musharraf had no choice but to appeal to the Bush government to allow a rescue mission to recover the stranded spies. Over several nights starting on 5 November a series of secret flights were given permission to land in Kunduz, to rescue the Pakistani intelligence officers (dubbed 'Operation Evil Airlift').[55] The very people who had once supported bin Laden were

being allowed to escape, protected by American air power. It is almost certain that Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders seized the opportunity to escape alongside their Pakistani supporters.

With the collapse of the northern fronts only Kabul held out but it was becoming increasingly obvious that the Taliban regime was in its death throes. A motley caravan of Northern Alliance T-55 tanks and assorted armoured vehicles pointed itself south and began to roll up the fleeing Taliban on the Old Road to Kabul. A single American B-52 bomber was all that was needed to hurry the Taliban along their way.[56] The offensive started on 12 November. By the following grey morning, following a two hour bombardment which met no reply, the Northern Alliance was parading through the streets of the city from which it had been ejected five years earlier. Excited mobs led Western journalists to photograph the few dead Taliban that could be found, like so much road-kill. The unthinkable had happened, but for American forces the celebrations were muted. Osama bin Laden, who rented a house in Kabul, and who appears to have fled to the city from Kandahar expecting a strike against his Tarnak Farm compound, had vanished. There were rumours, counter-rumours and false sightings but nobody really knew where the fugitive had fled.

The consequences of the fall of Kabul were strangely anti-climactic. The Taliban regime had been defeated but the war was far from over. The main prize was at large. Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, had also vanished, reportedly smuggled over the border on the back of a motorbike. According to Pakistani journalist and author Ahmed Rashid, Mullah Omar in fact hid in Helmand and only made the passage of forced exile in the winter of 2002 when it was apparent that American forces were staying in Afghanistan and effectively protracting (at least in his eyes) a vindictive war against Pashtuns.[57] Following him into exile in Quetta were the former head of the Taliban army, Mullah Akthar Osmani; the hard-line, one-legged Mullah Dadullah; and his former interior and defence ministers, Mullah Abdul Razaq and Mullah Obaidullah Akhund.

There was no surrender and a peace treaty was an unthinkable as well as an impractical proposition. Pockets of Taliban (in fact mostly foreign fighters) still existed throughout the territory of Afghanistan. Militias continued to roam the countryside – nobody knew how many or where. With the traditional fighting season now drawing to a close, some chose to lay down their arms and return to their farms. The Taliban pocket in Kunduz, mainly refugee fighters from Mazar-e Sharif, quit the fight on 24 November, encouraged by a demonstration of American air power.

Two weeks later, in the south, Afghanistan’s soon-to-be interim president Hamid Karzai,

accepted the bloodless surrender of Kandahar on 6 December. The fall of this city was also anti-climactic. A US Marine Task Force 58 had already seized a desert airstrip around eighty kilometres south of Kandahar (the same airstrip used by Osama bin Laden and wealthy Gulf Arabs on hunting trips). Now renamed Objective Rhino it served as a base for a move north to the city. With American and Pakistani support, a former, brutal warlord, Gul Agha Sherzai advanced from the Pakistani border leading a reconstituted Barakzai tribal militia. Karzai's Poplozai kinsmen marched from Uruzgan in the north, and the western approaches to the city were sealed by Alikozai tribesmen who had broken their alliance with the Taliban. Karzai's militia was challenged at a pass near a village called Sayd Alim Kalay for two days. With support from American special forces, including air strikes, resistance was broken on 4 December leaving the city wide open. Reportedly, it was Mullah Naqib, the Alikozai leader, rather than Karzai, who was instrumental in persuading the Taliban to hand over power peacefully. Another account suggests the Helmandi Rais Baghrani played a key role.[58] The latter would then be accused of sheltering Mullah Omar, creating an American obsession with Baghran in northern Helmand, Rais Baghrani's heartland. The British would eventually pay dearly for this fixation, finding themselves drawn into a pointless sweep of northern Helmand – Operation Mountain Thrust - when they eventually deployed a task force to the province in the spring of 2006.

Naqib was the obvious choice for the governorship but this crown was stolen by the bullying Sherzai who had arrived on a crest of American firepower and Pakistani rupees. As in so many other instances in southern Afghanistan the least promising candidate seized power. This single act would provoke many of the ills Kandahar would subsequently suffer as Sherzai shamelessly sought to promote his own kinsmen over rival tribesmen. He was greatly assisted in this project by being awarded lucrative contracts with American forces, and by raising a unit – the *Nazmi Khas*, or Special Ones – to guard Kandahar Airport.[59] The wily Sherzai would eventually end his career as a provincial governor, photographed for posterity alongside a nonplussed President Obama. All the tribal militias were eventually rolled into 2 Corps which provided the foundation for the Afghan National Army 205 'Hero' Corps – the formation the British would be asked to train in 2006. By the time Karzai appointed his own brother to preside over the Kandahar provincial council the tribal feuding had once again become uncontrollable.

The fall of Helmand was similarly quick and virtually bloodless.[60] American aircraft bombed a camp in Bolan (an area just west of the provincial capital Lashkar Gah); a hill south of the commercial capital Gereshk, used as an artillery base; a purported Taliban

headquarters in the same town; and, oddly, a cotton gin which the British had originally built. The Alizai Sher Mohammed Akhundzada then crossed the border from Pakistan with the soon-to-be president Hamid Karzai and mobilised fighters in northern Helmand. In the south, a Noorzai named Abdul Rahman Jan who had been evicted by the Taliban returned from Iranian exile and retook Marjah District, after some stiff fighting. By the end of November, the Taliban had fled, leaving Helmand to a four-way power tussle between another Noorzai named Isreal Khan (who somewhat opportunistically declared himself governor), an ex-mujahidin Hazifullah Khan, Abdul Rahman Jan, and Sher Akhundzada. The latter won the beauty contest, endorsed by the Americans, despite the fact the majority of his fighters were Taliban who had simply switched sides. The commercial capital Gereshk at first went to an ex-*Harakat* mujahidin named Khan Mohammad, but he was eventually displaced the American-backed ex-*Hizb-e Islami* mujahid Mir Wali who was given command of the 93rd Division, such as it existed.[61] The first Western soldiers reportedly entered Lashkar Gah on 31 December, marking the beginning of what would be a fourteen year involvement in the province.

With the Taliban's traditional stronghold surrendered to a fellow Pashtun, at least the internecine Afghan war was over for that winter. American forces hunting Osama bin Laden were drawn to the Tora Bora mountain range south-east of Kabul where all leads seemed to point. This was wild and difficult country, covered in the lower reaches with conifer forests that afforded plenty of cover to anyone evading a hunter force. The mountain sides were riddled with caves that offered concealment from the air as well as protection from aerial bombs. This is where the last lines of the first act of the war were written. Bombers dropped 15,000 pound 'Daisy Cutter' bombs and 5,000 pound GBU-28 'bunker busters' to winkle out the mostly Arab fighters that had fled to Tora Bora (the more controversial BLU-118/B thermobaric bomb would not be used until the following spring). All of this was to no avail. In some cases evidence of occupancy was found, and corpses. Mostly the air strikes appeared to destroy vacated positions. As Anthony Cordesman observed, little about Operation Enduring Freedom gave confidence that Western forces had learned how to fight an irregular enemy.[62]

Crucially, however many Arab fighters were or were not caught in the Tora Bora mountains, Osama bin Laden was not amongst them. It appears almost certain that the very Afghan militias co-opted by American special forces to winkle him out, actually helped to smuggle him out. This was suspected at the time by the American commanders on the spot and should have rung a bank of alarm bells in Washington, but did not. Bin

Laden's evasion had one inescapable implication. The war, now dubbed 'the Global War on Terror', would go on. This was a problem. Nobody in the Pentagon, still less in Whitehall, had given serious consideration to Act Two of the war. Nevertheless, the fact that the war had failed to achieve its main aim did little to stop a rush of commentators explaining what it all meant.

A singular aspect of this first major conflict of the 21st century was that it had been an absurdly cheap war, costing perhaps $3 billion.[63] Within a matter of years the US government would be spending (or squandering) three hundred times this amount of national treasure in a war in Iraq. The relative cheapness of Operation Enduring Freedom mattered to a Pentagon, led by Donald Rumsfeld, keen to demonstrate the value of 'war lite'. It was cheap precisely because a few hundred specialist soldiers were used in place of brigades and divisions. As if to reinforce the point, the satisfied Defense Secretary flashed a photograph to the media of American special force soldiers from Tiger Team 02 riding on horseback with Uzbek tribesmen. It evoked the spirit of the Wild West in one compelling image. This photograph belied the fact that this had also been a technological war, or at any rate, without the impressive array of military technology at their disposal, the cavalrymen would not have got very far. American air forces had flown close to 15,000 sorties – supporting allies a mere 1,500.[64] More than 12,000 bombs and missiles had been dropped and launched, 56 per cent of which had been precision weapons. This only amounted to about 5 per cent of the number of bombs dropped on Iraqi forces in the first Gulf War and about half the number of bombs dropped in Serbia and Kosovo. Importantly 4,600 were JDAMs – the new and inexpensive Joint Direct Attack Munition that used GPS guidance to find the target. In total, the combined American air forces dumped 8,500 tons of high explosives on the luckless Taliban.

This aerial thumping had various effects on different actors. The mesmerising manifestation of American military reach impressed British politicians. It made them more ready partners to the yoke of American military adventurism. Both the Taliban and the Northern Alliance were also impressed. Afghans had been used to ineffective and indiscriminate Soviet carpet bombing but this was lethality of a completely different order. Pakistan watched apprehensively from the wings, with good reason. It subsequently emerged the Northern Alliance had captured about 4,500 Pakistani foreign fighters.[65] The number killed in action or murdered after capture would never be known. The number that successfully fled was almost certainly two or three times the number of Pakistani prisoners of war. This was a remarkable level of support for the Taliban. In effect, Pakistan had been

under-writing the regime that had protected and given refuge to Osama bin Laden with a large mercenary army of several thousands of fighters. It was no surprise that Pakistan's military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, twitched when the American president declared that anyone who was not with America in the war on terror was against America and would face consequences. When Colin Powell subsequently visited Pakistan and made seven non-negotiable demands, including overflight rights and access to military installations, Musharraf dared not refuse. Afghanistan's other neighbours also watched the unfolding events keenly, some with a view to cashing in on the sudden arrival of North Americans with their easy largesse and deep pockets, and others with apprehension that a former Cold War foe was now intruding in a traditional Russian sphere of influence.

For two services with bigger budgets than the combined GDPs of several countries, Operation Enduring Freedom was cause for renewed inter-service rivalry. Who had won the war – the air force, or the carrier-borne aircraft of the navy? Both air forces had flown roughly the same number of total sorties, including strike, reconnaissance, tanker and transport missions. But the USAF had only flown about a quarter of the strike missions and had succeeded in dropping 75 per cent of all munitions, of which roughly three quarters were precision munitions.[66] The USN, by contrast, had flown 4,900 of the total 6,500 strike sorties but had dropped about a quarter of all munitions. Indeed the carrier-borne F-18E's had taken the brunt of the flying, racking up an impressive 3,700 attack sorties, commonly exceeding the USN's already unbeatable surge sortie rate – the number of aircraft that can be kept airborne at any one time. The USAF's F-16's, by contrast, had flown a modest 470 attack sorties.[67] What was stunning about this effort was that 80 per cent of the aircraft had taken off *without* a pre-determined target – a testament to CENTCOM's ability to find targets and vector aircraft in near-real time, across time zones and across thousands of miles.[68] No other military power in the world could match this performance, or anywhere near it.

The discrepancy in sorties flown versus bombs dropped could be explained by the renaissance of an aircraft that some argued had seen the best of its days – the old-fashioned bomber. USAF bombers had flown 700 sorties, over half of which were flown by the Vietnam-era B-52s. It was these workhorses of the sky that had decisively tipped the balance in terms of the sheer number of bombs dropped. Over the course of the first months of the war, the USAF based just ten B-52s and eight B-1B bombers on the British-administered island of Diego Garcia (it could be argued that this was actually Britain's key contribution to the war effort).[69] The islands were about 2,500 miles from Afghanistan,

which meant that every 24 hour cycle, about ten bombing runs could be mounted. This did not sound like much, and it would only amount to a tenth of the total attack sorties, but crucially these handful of aircraft dropped 11,500 of the 17,500 bombs that were dropped by the end of the year. Close to 90 per cent of the bombs dropped by the USAF had been dropped by its bombers, a statistic that provoked the Air Force Chief of Staff, General John Jumper, to declare that the use of bombers had been 'transformational'.[70] It was, to a point. The lumbering B-52s (some aircraft were older than the pilots flying them) had clearly undertaken the heavy duty shifting. Typically, one of these aircraft was dumping close to forty bombs per mission.

The B-1B had been efficient, perhaps the most efficient aircraft in the war. These bombers flew just four per cent of the total strike sorties but delivered more JDAMs than all other aircraft combined.[71] In one mission, four B-1Bs dropped nearly 100 JDAMs in the space of twenty minutes. The significance of this astonishing demonstration of aerial power could hardly be exaggerated – one hundred targets, precisely struck, in the time it took to smoke a cigarette, was irresistible and over-matching force. No wonder the Taliban were impressed. Only the 'billion dollar' B-2 disappointed. This white elephant of the USAF flew just twelve sorties, albeit setting amazing seventy hour endurance records.[72] 'When you roll it all together,' gloated retired air force Lieutenant General Thomas McInerney, 'I say we are ten times more powerful'.[73]

An under-resourced RAF could only look on and envy this magnificent display. The Royal Navy was also dwarfed and embarrassed by its American counterparts. While HMS *Illustrious* struggled to find some meaningful role, the USS *Kitty Hawk* – a floating city – acted as the forward base not only for the Navy SEALs, but also for the Green Beret and air force special force units.

Despite the impressive statistics, the air war had not been an unqualified success. The problem of Battle Damage Assessment (BDA) – quantifying accurately who or what had been hit – had not been resolved since the air war over Kosovo. This problem was partly caused by the sheer number of air sorties, each one of which had to be examined by an analyst reviewing cockpit footage or post-strike reconnaissance imagery, but the real difficulty was establishing the truth from grainy video taken from 15,000 feet rather than from 'ground count' surveys.

In the few cases where forensic teams were able to examine bomb strikes there were surprises. Bunkers had survived near impacts from large bombs. Imagined targets had

proved to be just that. ‘Hard targets’ – whether because they were underground, or because the angle of attack proved especially difficult – had proved challenging. Mobile targets – the ‘flex targets’ of the Kosovo war – had also proved challenging. More bombs had missed than the pilots cared to admit. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the air war had been determining that the target was valid at all. The imperative of minimising civilian casualties and avoiding collateral damage governed all aerial attacks, but organisations like Human Rights Watch were quick to record that American pilots had proved much less scrupulous with the lives of these central Asiatic people, than they had been with the European populace in the Balkans. Was this subconscious vengefulness, racism, or just a reflection of the difficulties of running a ‘clean’ air war in an environment where it was very difficult to separate combatants from civilians? Whatever lay behind the higher rates of civilian casualties, a failure to address the issue would later cause great collateral damage to the subsequent NATO operation as Afghan tolerance of Western ‘mistakes’ waned.

It was not just that it was difficult to tell whether a small black and white figure on a video display was enemy or not, it was also difficult to spot that person in the first place. This enemy had no headquarters, no logistics hubs, no infrastructure, no resupply columns, no concentrations of vehicles, not even concentrations of foot soldiers. American pilots in multi-million dollar machines were chasing individuals armed with AK-47s. This was not the ‘target-rich array’ that pilots had enjoyed in the first Gulf War. This was more – as UAV operators would remark – like trying to find something by looking down a straw. All these problems were greatly exacerbated by mercenary Afghans keen to exploit American air power to settle personal scores. Dozens of civilians may have died for no better reason than they belonged to an enemy clan. This readiness to use Western bombs to kill fellow Afghans, and NATO’s gullibility in the face of Afghan guile, would also undermine the later campaign. Nobody in Afghanistan, in the final reckoning, was a neutral.

What emerged, when the dust settled at the end of the year, was a sense of triumphalism and a typically Western focus on the role of technology in modern warfare. The moral of the story was clear. A lunatic with a medieval outlook on life – a sort of latter-day Mahdi, that foolhardy fellow who had caused the British so many problems in the upper reaches of the Nile in the 19th century – had dared to take on the world’s superpower, and that power had crushed him with contemptuous ease. This was gunboat diplomacy in its modern form, courtesy of the great engines of American industry that

ensured her military supremacy. This was what America did best.

It was unfortunate that the focus fell on this, the West's continuing narrative of the 'Revolution in Military Affairs', for three reasons. First, it underplayed the all-important human dimension to warfare. Wars are fought by humans for human reasons, and not by machines. The Taliban may have been beaten but these 'fighting addicts', as a Pakistani colonel who trained the Taliban once described them, were far from finished with the war. Second, Western emphasis on technological warfare sidelined the critical role played by the Northern Alliance. Jonathan Davis, writing for the defence specialists *Jane's*, astutely picked up on this Western myopia. In the case of a larger-than-life character like Dostum, a certain bitterness set in as his crucial role in the overthrow of the Taliban became overtaken by a simplistic Western categorisation of all 'warlords' as necessarily bad. The debt to characters like Dostum never received deserved public acknowledgement.

The third reason for caution was the lack of a credible back-up plan. Lord Robert's famous conundrum, first posed in 1879, had no answer in the winter of 2001:

'The two questions therefore which chiefly exercised the minds of people in authority with regard to Afghan affairs, were, what was to be done with Afghanistan now we had got it, and, who would be set up as Ruler with any chance of being able to hold his own?'[74]

In an ironic twist, the first British government report published in the aftermath of the fall of the Taliban was headed precisely by this quote, though no one could have possibly foreseen at that moment the bleakness in the irony. Operation Enduring Freedom had been an updated version of the Clinton-era Operations Infinite Reach and Resolve. These envisaged stamping on an enemy and paid little attention to what followed afterwards. What emerged was a military plan outside a political, cultural or social context. In other words, what emerged was no plan at all.

Britain's part in Operation Enduring Freedom (named Operation Veritas) was almost invisible and would have remained so but for the actions of an Afghan cameraman who filmed British special force soldiers firing wildly over the ramparts of Qala-e Jangi fort at Mazar-e Sharif, following an attempted jail-break by Taliban prisoners.[75] Qala-e Jangi became the most extensively reported single event of the entire war because of the coincidence of at least three television crews at the fort when the fighting erupted. Over 200 Taliban prisoners were killed in this controversial incident.[76] Television footage later showed dozens of bodies strewn across an open courtyard of the fort. None was armed and

many had their hands bound behind their backs. At least two British servicemen were also wounded in one of several American air strikes on the fort. If a similar incident involving a massacre of prisoners and British troops had occurred in Bosnia or Kosovo there would have been demands for a public inquiry, but this was Afghanistan and Taliban lives (or Pakistani and Arab lives, for it seems that most of 'the Taliban' were in fact foreigners) were a debased currency. Calls by Amnesty International to investigate the deaths were rejected by Washington and London. No official seemed to question too hard what actually happened at Qala-e Jangi and the incident was swiftly buried, along with the bodies, following the collapse of the Taliban regime. The likelihood is that the six British servicemen involved in Qala-e Jangi incident had become embroiled in an event that resulted in the killing of scores of unarmed prisoners.

The public face of Britain's involvement in the short war to oust the Taliban regime was presented by the faces of Royal Marines from B Company, 40 Commando who arrived on the night of 15 November to secure Bagram Airport north of Kabul, blinking in the lights of media cameras. Dressed in a mix of green and desert camouflage, as if confused by their ultimate destination, they stepped off the ramp of the RAF C-130 with the swagger of new boys joining an old war. It seemed an apt metaphor for Britain's entire subsequent involvement in Afghanistan.

What they found was chaos, and not a little suspicion. The airport was derelict and littered with the debris of previous fighting. Unexploded ordnance lay everywhere. When the airport was finally declared safe, over 200 unexploded pieces of ordnance had been recovered (which was a modest number compared to Kabul Airport where French soldiers ended up disposing of 70,000 anti-personnel mines).[77] There was no running water or electricity. Everything that was needed to survive had to be flown in. The MOD's new-found enthusiasm for expeditionary warfare was about to be put to the test. Locals who remembered the arrival of Soviet troops at this airport had to be calmed down by the marines. Gun-toting Afghans soon joined the British contingent but nobody was really sure whether they were there to assist in guarding the airport, or to keep the British constrained within the airport compound. Within a few weeks this first footprint swelled with the arrival of American soldiers bringing with them additional resources, vital communications, and the confidence of a force that meant to stay.

If it was evident that this Anglo-American force intended to remain in Afghanistan at least for the foreseeable future, it was not clear that it had a meaningful post-war plan. British campaign objectives ranged from the fanciful to the nebulous. They included:

eliminating the threat of international terrorism; deterring other states from supporting terrorists; reintegrating Afghanistan as a responsible member of the international community; building the widest possible coalition with United Nations support; dealing with a possible humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan (which never materialised); and 'reconstructing' Afghanistan. This latter task, an early assessment noted could prove very burdensome. It had taken $5 billion to 'reconstruct' Bosnia, a small country with a quarter of the population of Afghanistan. This effort was ongoing and far from complete. Reconstructing Afghanistan, the report advised, could be expected to take between 5-10 years and prove far more expensive.

The problem with these goals was not just their naïve worthiness, but the fact that no British government would seriously countenance the true cost of putting back together the Afghan Humpty-Dumpty. More relevantly, nor would an American government. The coalition had no resourced or long-term post-war strategy. Partial victory and its consequences had not been considered. From the very beginning, the finishing line had been blown over by the desert sands. As Cordesman warned:

'In war, more than any other human activity no one should begin what they are not prepared to finish, and few modern wars will have outcomes where desirable governments, economies, societies, and patterns of alliance magically occur simply because the fighting ends. The officer who cannot adjust to this reality is unfit to wear his or her uniform. The political leader unwilling to face this reality is, at best, a recipe for military futility and, at worst, a recipe for disaster.'[78]

As if keen to sow these seeds of disaster an ebullient British Prime Minister confidently told the country: 'We are not here just for today, tomorrow, [or] next week.'[79] Britain's commitment to Afghanistan would indeed become long-term and burdensome, but the Prime Minister who made the commitment would be long retired and forging a lucrative career in international consultancy.

It would later be argued that the events of September 11 and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan were all part of a bin Laden master strategy to suck America into a Middle Eastern quagmire. The idea seemed far-fetched given that the expulsion of American forces from Muslim lands had been one of bin Laden's ambitions. Bin Laden did make the much-quoted boast:

'All that we have to do is to send two mujahidin to the furthest point east to raise a piece of cloth on which is written al-Qaida, in order to make the generals race there to

cause America to suffer human, economic, and political losses without their achieving for it anything of note other than some benefits for their private companies.'[80]

This statement, however, was made in 2004 and seemed a post-facto rationalisation rather than the expression of a pre-meditated strategy. It seems far more plausible that bin Laden had not even seriously considered an American response that would involve the eventual invasion of two Muslim countries and the toppling of their regimes. The main reason why Mullah Omar refused to hand over bin Laden was because he was persuaded by his Arab guests that America would never contemplate such a ground invasion.[81] All he had to do was weather an aerial bombardment and let the storm pass. The emboldened Mullah Omar went further, passing draconian edicts, arresting Western humanitarian workers, and in a vile gesture that recalled the treatment of Jews in the previous century, ordered all Afghan Hindus to wear yellow badges. These were not the actions of a king anticipating the imminent loss of his crown.

Neither, it seems likely, had bin Laden nor any of the other conspirators involved in the September 11 attacks imagined the mass murder of thousands. Whether through stupidity or a failure of imagination the terrorists did not appear to reckon accurately the calculus of death that would inevitably follow the act of flying fuel-laden wide-bodied jets into hundred storey skyscrapers. Western structural engineers were also taken by surprise and the subject of the Twin Towers' vulnerability attracted significant study post the event. It is difficult, ultimately, not to imagine a bin Laden shocked by the collapse of the Twin Towers. Like an idiot schoolboy he had thrown a brick but never expected to smash the window.

For the coalition, which by early December meant a loose and uneasy alliance of NATO countries, some political arrangement was urgently needed to fill the vacuum that had been created by the deposition of the Taliban regime. The Bonn Agreement, hastily drafted under the auspices of the German government on 5 December, aimed to address this question. Four stages were envisaged to create a stable political future for Afghanistan. First, an Afghan Interim Authority (AIA) would be set up under the Western-appointed Hamid Karzai, a moderate Pushtun. In the second phase, an Emergency Loya Jirga – or meeting of Afghanistan's power-brokers – would convene in June the following year, to select a Transitional Authority. This would be followed by a Constitutional Loya Jirga in December 2002 to determine Afghanistan's future constitution. If the plan held, the last stage would involve a presidential election in December 2004, followed by Parliamentary elections in 2005. Holding the plan together would prove a difficult task

hampered by internal rivalries, a barely functioning government and Western reluctance to over committing in Afghanistan. Two implications were clear: for better or for worse, the little-known Hamid Karzai would be Afghanistan's de facto president for at least the next three years, and possibly longer. And second, the AIA would be run by the victors of the war creating the impression that the whole scheme had been a reward for the Northern Alliance and punishment for the majority Pashtun population.

In all these deliberations the Taliban were conspicuous by their absence, which would later be viewed by many as a gross strategic mistake. This would lead to the fallacy of the 'missed opportunity' (much like the 1945 'missed opportunity' relating to Ho Chi Minh). It is the case that several key Taliban leaders made peace overtures to Karzai in December. This group included Mullah Omar's chief of staff Tayyeb Agha; his deputy, Mullah Baradar; defence minister Mullah Obaidullah; and Mullah Abdul Razzaq the interior minister. But the argument that the Taliban may have been engaged in peace talks in Bonn is totally spurious. The Bush government made over thirty attempts to negotiate with the Taliban before launching Operation Enduring Freedom, all fruitless. The Northern Alliance had no intention of welcoming its recent enemy to the negotiating table, and would not have done so even if pressed. And lastly, a dogmatic and simplistic Western categorisation of Taliban as terrorists foredoomed any chance of reconciliation. Even if some Taliban representatives had been admitted to Bonn, what could they have possibly negotiated? A Western crisis industry – the so-called 'Kosovo crowd' - had already swung into action with its army of experts and consultants, all mapping out what was good for Afghanistan, and eyeing lucrative contracts. There was nothing *to* negotiate: the Western experts already had the answers.

The key posts in the AIA did in the first instance go to Northern Alliance leaders. The Defence Ministry was awarded to Muhammad Qassem Fahim who led the victorious Northern Alliance troops into Kabul. Fahim reportedly once ordered the torturing of Hamid Karzai but now Karzai needed him.[82] To some observers Fahim would become the real power behind the throne, which was why he was finally removed from his post in 2004 (but not before being bestowed the title of Marshal for life, to guarantee his continued loyalty). Fahim looked and acted like a thug. He was also hopelessly corrupt, deeply suspicious of ISAF – the soon-to-be established International Security Assistance Force - and made land grabs in Kabul, before eventually being embarrassed by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. The Department of the Interior was given to a fellow Tajik: Muhammad Yunus Qanooni. Educated, Western-dressed (and smart enough

to modify his dress on American network channels to mimic the corporate American look) he acted as the spokesman for the Northern Alliance and fulfilled a similar role on behalf of the AIA in Bonn. Qanooni's career would also become mired in scandal after he was allegedly caught trying to transfer one million dollars between bank accounts in London and Kabul. The last of the Northern Alliance trio was Dr Abdullah Abdullah. An ophthalmologist and son of a senator who had worked for King Zahir Shah, Dr Abdullah was a natural choice as Foreign Minister, an appointment he had held in the Northern Alliance. Dr Abdullah was the most credible and impressive Tajik politician and would later become Hamid Karzai's chief political rival, but he lacked the Pashtun background to make him a popular national figure.

Despite the accusations of an anti-Pushtun bias, former mujahidin were not entirely banished from the fledgling administration. Abdullah Wardak, a Pushtun, took over the Department of Martyrs and Disabled, but would later be assassinated by the Taliban as a traitor. The well-respected Adbul Rahim became Minister for Communications, before later assuming the Defence Minister portfolio. Haji Muhammad Mohaqqeq became a vice-chairman of the ruling council, and would later finish third in the 2004 presidential election. These were tough men and survivors. Most had been the victims of more than one attempt on their lives. For many Pashtuns, however, these posts were viewed as sops. Numerous delegates quit the proceedings and retired embittered to their heartlands.

Perhaps the most surprising appointment was that of Hamid Karzai himself as Chairman of the Ruling Council. A Popolzai from Kandahar, Karzai belonged to an established political dynasty. His grandfather and father served as deputy speakers in the Senate and Parliament respectively, and an uncle had served as Afghanistan's representative in the United Nations. Karzai himself served as the deputy foreign minister in the Rabbani government. During the Soviet-Afghan war Karzai mostly acted as fund-raiser, based in India where he had studied for his Master's degree. Like many Afghans, he welcomed the emergence of the Taliban but then broke with the movement when it became evident they were being used as a proxy by the ISI. It was during this period that he came into frequent contact with the CIA, never failing to warn them, so he would later allege, of the dangers posed by this fanatical movement. The Taliban repaid him by assassinating his father in Quetta where the family lived in exile.

Karzai had not been a mujahidin (although like many wealthy Afghans he supported his own small guard force). Nor did he have the charisma or the romance of the Northern Alliance leaders. In a nation of hirsutes, he sported a bald head and trimmed his beard. His

eyes seemed to rest in the far distance with an expression of melancholy, and his nose hung over his prominent lips. He did not look like the obvious leader to lift Afghanistan out of its dark past. But Karzai had other attributes which made him attractive to the Americans – notwithstanding that he was almost mistakenly killed in an air strike. In one of those impossible twists, fifteen minutes after cheating death from the air strike, he received a telephone call informing him that the Bonn Conference had appointed him head of the newly established Afghan Interim Authority.[83]

Karzai was educated, a fluent English speaker, and a conservative, Pashtun moderate. He was also ambitious, an ambition which he literally wore on his body, dressing himself in a signature green gown and Karakul hat which had previously been worn by Afghan kings. The war had been won with the Tajik Northern Alliance, but the peace would have to be won by a Pashtun, Afghanistan's majority ethnic group. The CIA also felt more comfortable with a Pushtun, having kept the Northern Alliance at bay over many years, against British advice that they were backing the wrong horse. For all these reasons, and for lack of any other credible candidate following the death of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the crown fell in Karzai's lap. In a nation where symbolism mattered, Karzai received a Durrani tribal coronation at the Sher-i-Surkh shrine near Kandahar, in much the same way that his Taliban rival, Mullah Omar, confirmed his own kingship of the same confederation of tribes by donning the cloak of the Prophet Mohammed, a relic also kept in a Kandahar shrine. Nobody at the time foresaw Hamid Karzai's less appealing traits – his waywardness, his secretive deals, his tolerance of corruption. To most Western politicians, charmed by his courteousness and respectability, Karzai seemed the best of the bunch.

What emerged over the next three years, as Afghan expert Antonio Giustozzi described it, was a three-way tussle between the 'aristocrats' from Afghanistan's old elites; the mainly US-educated technocrats who had spent many years in exile; and former warlords and militiamen.[84] The aristocrats, some of whom were also monarchists, were gravely weakened. The so-called enlightened elite who made up the technocrats were cut-off from the realities of Afghanistan. And the former warlords were anxious for tangible rewards for their sacrifice. The latter mostly cared about their personal fiefdoms and openly disregarded instructions from Kabul. As these still controlled tens of thousands of armed men, there was little the nascent Afghan government could do to rein them in. Karzai would fall back on patronage as the only tool open to him to distribute power – 'imperial, patrimonial polity' as it was dubbed - but this had limits and pitfalls. In the meantime, the

Western project naively envisaged a political modernization of Afghanistan, a concern that barely registered in the provinces where the real power still lay.

The Bonn Agreement not only mapped out Afghanistan's immediate political future. It also 'called for the deployment of an international force to Afghanistan to assist the new Afghan Interim Authority… with the provision of security and stability for Kabul'. Shortly after the conclusion of combat operations on Operation Enduring Freedom, the globe-trotting CENTCOM General Tommy Franks met with British counterparts. It is not known whether Defence Secretary Hoon was involved or indeed what civilian oversight there was in the meetings. Franks did later describe Hoon as a good friend and was fulsome in his praise of British commitment.[85] All that is known with some probability is that as a result of some backroom dealing between the military men, the concept of this international security force in Afghanistan took shape. No European partners were present, or it seems, were even aware that the Americans and British were holding such discussions.

For European nations likely to provide the foot soldiers the eventual agreement was importantly undertaken under UN auspices (UN Security Council Resolution 1386, agreed on 20 December). Nobody, however, wanted to step forward to take the lead. The European NATO countries (with the exception of Britain) were very reluctant to be drawn into an American war. For the Americans, with the unfinished business of finding Osama bin Laden and destroying any remaining terrorist camps, constraining the Europeans to Kabul was a key concern. Importantly, Washington also demanded that any NATO forces deployed in Afghanistan should fall under a single American-led command. The Pentagon, however, did not want to become involved in a UN or peace keeping operation, so the ball inevitably was passed to the British. The British in turn were supportive of the American single command proposal (not least because they realised they could not run an operation in Afghanistan without American airlift and other key military resources), but were reluctant to commit to more than a three month deployment - a reluctance which European chancelleries conspiratorially suspected was part of a cunning British ruse to satisfy American demands, before slipping out of the country just as the real trouble started.

Eventually a compromise was reached (American negotiators foot-dragged the longest until it became apparent they could not hope to shift the reluctant Europeans). The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) would be stood up for six months, after which time it was anticipated the AIA would be able to take over security responsibilities

in the capital – a measure of just how unreal Western expectations were at this time. There would be two separate commands, as the Europeans demanded, and the latter would remain within Kabul, as the Americans demanded. Who would lead this force was left open to further negotiations but it looked likely this would be a British-led operation, not a NATO operation, supported principally by Germany and France. Nobody was offering to step forward beyond the three month period tentatively offered by the British. It was messy, unrealistic and an augury of Byzantine nature of ISAF. American dismissiveness of the Europeans over this period should not be under-estimated. Walt Slocombe, the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy during the second Clinton presidency, would later describe the allies, in an unguarded moment, as stupid, wobbly, and wimpish.[86] The biggest fear for American policy-makers was that European military forces and their political masters were simply not up to the task.

What followed was a British charge from which no European government could retreat. The figure leading this charge was Major General John McColl, the general officer commanding 3 (UK) Division. Just behind the charging general, it may be assumed, was the figure of the Prime Minister, Tony Blair. Part of McColl's confidence seems to have stemmed from the deployment of a task force headquarters just three months previously which suggested that a British-led mission was feasible (Operation Bessemer – Macedonia). Over three days (14-17 December) he made a lightning reconnaissance to Kabul. On his return he told the Defence Secretary that the British Army could – and it may be intuited, should – deploy a task force to Kabul. The following day Hoon informed Parliament that Britain had stepped forward and offered to establish the first international security force in Kabul. By this stage, there had already been a joint US-UK presence at Bagram Airport for the last month. Two days later, the announcement of the establishment of a peacekeeping force was made at Bonn.

The decision in the end surprised no one. As America's closest military ally and the only NATO country that had joined Operation Enduring Freedom at its inception, it followed naturally that Britain, now enjoying a toehold in the country, should take the lead in consolidating the international presence in Afghanistan. For the Prime Minister, this was an opportunity to demonstrate the relevance of British forces to sceptical Americans. To critics, Britain had slipped into the role of America's charlady, without much discussion or prompting. The short timeframes meant that the MOD had to work feverishly over the holiday period to warn off units and make preparations for their deployment. Units that had been expecting a routine return to barracks after Christmas

leave found themselves urgently packing equipment, ordering maps, and hunting for any information they could find on Kabul and the situation in Afghanistan. The unit chosen to lead the British task force, 2 Para, was at high readiness anyway, but the unfortunate timing of the operation in the middle of leave compressed timings further.

The pace then quickened further. McColl returned to Britain for just three days before returning to Kabul. The day after his return to the Afghan capital, on 22 December, the Afghan Interim Authority was stood up. The British Embassy formally opened its doors on 23 December. The first British soldiers to deploy to Kabul, signallers from 3(UK) Signals Regiment, were allowed to spend Christmas with their families but were Afghanistan-bound on Boxing Day, their morale sagging like their over-fed stomachs. On the penultimate day of the year, marines from B Company, still camped like gypsies in the dilapidated Bagram Airport, set off on the very first British joint patrol with local Afghan security forces. Neither side understood each other but the event was staged for the media and not to improve security in the Kabul environs. It would be the first of thousands of such patrols. At 7.30 am on 1 January, McColl formally activated the ISAF HQ at the Old Sports Club in Kabul. The gesture was symbolic as the headquarters would not be fully manned and running until mid-February, but the symbolism counted. The man who best understood this was the Prime Minister. On 4 January, Tony Blair landed at Bagram Airport, repeating the gesture he had made in Kosovo. The Muslim Kosovars would be eternally grateful to Blair for his solidarity, the Afghans, less fulsome in their appreciation.

In truth, the initial ISAF deployment was shambolic and bedevilled with tensions. The speed with which McColl had acted alarmed the European allies who refused to link up with the rudimentary communications infrastructure established in Kabul for fear it would imply subordination to Operation Enduring Freedom. The seeds for the later fractured command arrangements were sown in that first month. As a result of exaggerated attitudes over the threat (which was non-existent), the RAF would only fly under the cover of night, and insisted on the wearing of body armour. The more sensible European contingents flew by day and deployed more quickly and efficiently than the British. This left the lead nation in the uncomfortable position of leading somewhat from the rear. Despite McColl's confidence, the British lacked adequate expeditionary equipment, and soon became known as 'the Flintstones', a nickname echoed by 'the Borrowers' moniker earned in the second Gulf War the following year (in the Korean War, of course, the British were known as 'the Woolworth's Boy's' – there is an unfortunate history of deploying soldiers on the cheap). Some judged the presumptuous British had become the laughing stock. 2 Para arrived without their ammunition, to the consternation of the paratroopers. McColl's personal

dynamism and competence were never in question but behind him was a creaking and in some parts a broken machine. And behind McColl was a Prime Minister who aspired to play a pivotal role in international affairs but whose government was not fully supporting the armed forces.

By the time the Prime Minister's flight had returned to Britain, his Defence Secretary was explaining to the House the composition and purpose of the British task force. A Military Technical Agreement (MTA) had already been signed four days previously in Kabul by the self-appointed Afghan Interior Minister, Mohammad Yunis Qanouni and by the British representative, McColl. 'The force,' Hoon explained, 'will be charged with assisting the Afghan Interim Authority in the maintenance of security in Kabul and its surrounding areas.' Hoon was at pains to emphasise that this was a separate mission to Operation Enduring Freedom:

'The force will have a particular mission (known as Operation Fingal), distinct from Operation Enduring Freedom. But The United States will provide essential enabling support to deploy and sustain the force.'

This was a candid admission that Britain, and the remainder of the NATO countries offering troops to support the first ISAF mission, would be dependent on American resources. Rumsfeld's jaundiced view of 'old Europe' seemed to be confirmed – the allies across the Atlantic could not, when challenged, project even a modest security force, without American assistance. 'Let me be clear', the Defence Secretary concluded, 'the International Community is sending the force to assist the Afghans, not to interfere in their affairs.'[87] It was a sincere sentiment, if staggeringly off the mark.

There was less sincerity, or perhaps just ignorance, over the circumstances surrounding the signing of the MTA. The majority of the Afghan powerbrokers in Kabul, led by Defence Minister Fahim Khan, were against the ISAF deployment, and indeed were opposed to any foreign troops at all in Afghanistan. A moderate camp proposed a maximum of 1,000 troops but stipulated these be based outside Kabul and confined to barracks. It appears that McColl pressed Karzai to agree to a 5,000 strong force with a wider security role. It is assumed, but not known, that McColl was acting under political instruction to persuade Karzai to accept a large Western force. Whoever was behind this initiative, it may be observed that British foreign policy was effectively being delegated to a soldier. In undertaking this persuasion, McColl was also assuming responsibility for the foreign policy of a few European allies who would be dragged into any eventual agreement. The actual number '5,000' appears to have been a back-of-fag packet UN

number. Remarkably, it seems the British were privately touting as many as 25,000 soldiers.[88] As in so many other instances of the Afghan story, the solution was not what the Afghans wanted, but rather what was imposed by a Westerner, and with some rather casual arithmetic Sensitivity over the issue was such that the MTA had just two signatories and one witness: McColl, Qanouni, and a Brigadier Kratzer acting as witness for Lieutenant General Mikolashek, the nominated NATO Coalition Forces Land Component Commander in Europe.

Had the fate of Afghanistan ever been signed off so speedily by just two individuals, one a foreigner, and neither enjoying any political legitimacy whatsoever over the Afghan people? Did the new Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, who did not visit Afghanistan and who was anyway pointedly side-lined by Blair, know what had actually transpired in Kabul? Were Afghan reservations over this Western-imposed solution honestly communicated? What discussions had taken place, and between whom? Were the Europeans kept fully informed? It seems not. When the news got out there was considerable surprise and some anger in Afghanistan. Who had agreed to this? Who had been consulted? For ordinary Kabulis, there was just confusion: the British paratroopers were assumed to be Russians, and a Gurkha reinforcement company, bizarrely, was thought to be the vanguard of an invading communist Chinese force.

The hurriedly formed British task force turned out to be a ragbag of units. The headquarters was drawn from 3(UK) Division but a second tactical headquarters drawn from 16 Air Assault Brigade also deployed, setting a pattern of multiple layers of command that became a feature of the war. The British were only deploying about 1,800 soldiers but they were deploying a divisional HQ, elements of a brigade HQ, and a battalion HQ to command the force – a highly unbalanced ratio of staff to frontline soldiers by any measure. 2 Para deployed as announced but had to be supported by the company of Gurkhas to make up the numbers. From the beginning it was evident the British Army would struggle to find sufficient infantry to meet its commitments. Elements of 33 and 36 Regiments Royal Engineers deployed to build the necessary camp infrastructure. 30 Signal Regiment provided strategic communications. Support troops were drawn from a number of units, including 13 Air Assault Regiment of the Royal Logistics Corps, and 16 Medical Regiment of the Royal Army Medical Corps. The British contingent would not be shouldering the burden alone. In total, nineteen other NATO countries eventually offered troops, commonly specialists like doctors and engineers, which ensured that there was a multi-national stamp on the operation.[89]

This force was commanded by McColl, the personality on the British side who more than any other actor created the momentum for the British mission in Kabul, and effectively acted as ISAF's gynaecologist. A former Royal Anglian - like the Chief of Defence Staff, General Mike Walker - he proved the perfect choice for the delicate mission. McColl combined a taxonomic eye for detail with a firm grasp of broader, strategic considerations. He had a reputation for setting rigorous standards. His headquarters ran like clockwork and it was thanks to his personal drive that the ISAF HQ was established in record time, despite all the difficulties. Over the next six months he would need patience and tact, qualities he enjoyed in abundance. The model general later rose to become Deputy SACEUR, the second-highest military post in NATO and the highest that a European general could aspire to. In McColl, a hesitant but later grateful Labour government seemed to have found their man.

McColl was the first in a succession of senior British officers who became drawn to the problem of Afghanistan and who felt strongly that Britain had an obligation to help the Afghan people. During the Algerian War a French negotiator had observed – '*Algérie montait à la tête'* ('Algeria got to your head') – and the same thing happened to a generation of British Army officers in a way that was not true of their American counterparts.[90] For the Americans, Afghanistan would always be about September 11. When revenge was finally exacted ten years later, against a backdrop of mounting casualties and costs, the desire to continue fighting a futile war waned. For the British Army, Afghanistan became a matter of pride as well as obligation. A whiff of the North West Frontier may also have played a part.

The last piece of the puzzle was finance. The proposed military and reconstruction operation would require massive funds. Eleven days after the announcement that a British task force would be despatched to Kabul, a ministerial level conference was held in Tokyo attended by sixty-one countries including representatives from the United States, the European Union, Japan and Saudi Arabia. An initial $4.5 billion was pledged to support the reconstruction of Afghanistan. This headline figure, like all the other financial pledges that followed, masked the true figure of funds eventually disbursed, still less spent in a productive fashion. It was a measure of the unrealism of the project that this represented less than five per cent of the funds eventually committed to 'reconstructing' Afghanistan.

In faraway Kabul the customary winter rains which turned the capital into a place of misery and mud were finally easing. The scent of spring combined with the great surge of international good will was heady stuff and it provoked 'the Kabul effect'. This was a

delusion that what was happening in the capital city could be replicated throughout Afghanistan – the malignant gene of the Taliban displaced and replaced by the virtuous genetic material of international benevolence. The delusion set in because no Western troops (other than American special force units chasing shadows in the hills) had set foot outside Kabul and its environs. Afghan politicians working with the international community were all Kabul-based and they told ISAF and donors exactly what they wanted to hear, parroting the mantras of reconstruction as if they were Western politicians on a campaign trail.

Over the first few months the Kabul effect would engender many strange and wonderful sights. Bianca Jagger, a critic of the American invasion and women's rights activist, was spotted in downtown Kabul, flanked by burly British paratroopers. Her visit would make not a jot of difference to the beggary, destitution and prostitution that was the daily lot for many women in Kabul, but it fed a media-machine promoting a story that 'good' was being done for Afghanistan's oppressed womenfolk. She was even coaxed into providing the perfect quote: ISAF, she told an approving McColl, was acting as 'a force for good'. Lawrie McMenemy, the football coach, turned up in Kabul, armed with club strips and a clutch of footballs. He organised a symbolic football match on a snow-bound pitch in the city's only sports stadium where the Taliban had once held executions. A platoon of Gurkhas was press-ganged into acting as cheer leaders for the event. The goodwill match almost back-fired when the crowd became rowdy and local police weighed in with the usual brutality, but the ISAF public relations officer was careful to omit any mention of crowd trouble in his post-match report. Geoff Hoon made an appearance on 6 February and was feted by his Afghan hosts. McColl – acting in his capacity as diplomat as well as soldier – was cajoled into cutting ribbons and planting trees as his hosts staged events to demonstrate Afghanistan's rebirth.

It was really nothing of the sort. This cosmopolitan city – Afghanistan's only cosmopolitan city - was simply rebounding after the lid of Taliban oppression had been lifted. And there was also another quite different Kabul effect in evidence. Government officials were beginning to consume Western aid money with the voracity of sharks, which was provoking a property boom as well as the sudden apparition of luxury cars on Kabul's grimy streets.

For the troops deployed on Operation Fingal, soldiering in Kabul mirrored the routines of peacekeeping operations in Kosovo or Bosnia, only in a far poorer environment. There were sangars to construct, sentry posts to man, and ablutions to build. The devastated

infrastructure meant that almost everyone was surviving in very basic conditions and living off ration packs. Huge stocks of ammunition were secured and destroyed: by the time 2 Para handed over to 1 Royal Anglian on 15 March, about 3 million items of ordnance had been destroyed, the overwhelming majority land mines.[91] Kabul's reputation as the most mined city in the world was not undeserved. In keeping with the 'hearts and minds' approach, the paratroopers mounted patrols in the city, engaged with the locals and reported on possible Quick Impact Projects, or QIPs. Over 200 such projects of varying sizes were proposed (but not all were funded or completed).[92] Joint patrols were mounted with the Afghan National Police, and the first battalion of a new National Guard was raised (but not paid, which caused its almost immediate disbandment). It all seemed humdrum and benign. There was one incident in which paratroopers opened fire and killed the occupants of a car that appeared to be acting suspiciously, but the incident was quickly smoothed over. A reporter who had the temerity to remind a 2 Para officer of the fate of the last British garrison to decamp in Kabul was brusquely reminded: 'The last lot weren't 2 Para.' Unbeknown to both, on 11 February an ominous milestone had been passed. On that day, the ISAF nominal role stood at 2,497 troops, or exactly the same number of soldiers in the ill-fated Kabul Field Force of 1870.

Optimism was reflected by the Defence Secretary when he addressed the House of Commons in mid-March:

'It is clear that this action has been remarkably successful. Afghanistan is now a very different country. The Taliban government, which harboured the Al Qaida terrorists, is no more. Terrorist training camps have been put out of action. The first steps towards recreating a functioning state have been taken. Aid agencies operate with increasing freedom. Refugees are beginning to return to their homes.'[93]

At this stage – just five months into the operation - the total contingent of forces had risen to 4,600 troops drawn from eighteen countries.[94] The hero of the hour, McColl, was lavished with praise for his role in bringing together this disparate alliance under a British-run headquarters. It was from Whitehall's perspective almost too good to be true. No British general since the Second World War had been responsible for leading a multi-national brigade on such a tricky operation. This was de facto NATO's first ground war, in the same way that Kosovo had been NATO's first air war, and a Briton was in charge. As importantly for the Treasury - eyeing suspiciously the possibility of an extended commitment - Turkey had agreed to assume command of the ISAF operation in the summer, and the Turks would be followed by a joint German-Dutch brigade. But the

Germans and Dutch only agreed to assume leadership of the mission on the basis that there would be no expansion of the mandate. At the same time, more interventionist voices were arguing for the deployment of Joint Regional Teams, or JRTs, across Afghanistan, as a compromise that might square the circle of competing American, European and Afghan interests. Although no plans had yet been made, this would all be a prelude to a NATO headquarters assuming command of the operation in August 2003, a renewed UN-mandate issued in December 2003, and a progressive expansion of ISAF beyond Kabul in 2004. However, such were the misgivings over deeper involvement in Afghanistan exactly the opposite message was being signalled.

By this stage it was evident British government policy was increasingly at odds with itself. On the one hand, the Defence Secretary was strongly hinting at a British withdrawal. On the other, Downing Street making promises to Washington of a continuing British commitment in the newly declared ‘War on Terror’. On 20 March, Parliament was told that commitments in Kabul did not alter the government’s ‘determination to draw down the number of British troops deployed as part of the ISAF’.[95] Rumours that the mission would expand were also scotched. ‘Let me make clear,’ Hoon warned, ‘that speculation that the ISAF will become a NATO force or a European Union force or anything other than a ‘coalition of the willing’ is just that – speculation,’ a flatly wrong assertion, as by the following year this is what it would become.[96] Service chiefs had no inkling that by next spring Britain would be mounting a full scale invasion of Iraq. Hoon himself was being kept in the dark. About the only person who appears to have had a secret understanding of Washington’s intentions was the Prime Minister himself, Tony Blair. At the time of writing of this book, this knowledge has still not been divulged by the Chilcott Inquiry.

In Hoon’s calculations, the principal reason for reticence over engagement in Afghanistan lay not so much in concerns over future commitments but in the baggage that Britain’s armed forces were already carrying: the perennial fear of ‘overstretch’ that dominated military debate during this period. The British Army was still heavily committed to Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Kosovo. Treasury pressure to limit costs was undiminished. Indeed, Hoon alluded to ‘overstretch’ in his 20 March statement, and sought to reassure the House that the new and possibly open-ended commitment to Afghanistan would not place an impossible strain on the armed forces.

If the Chancellor, Gordon Brown, was also hoping to limit the financial liabilities imposed by this new military commitment his hopes were about to be dashed because

mission creep was already setting in. In one of those unfortunate moments when a politician holds himself a hostage to fortune, Hoon had told the Commons, just two days earlier, that notwithstanding Britain's hand-over of responsibilities to Turkey, additional troops were, in fact, going to be deployed to Afghanistan – but, he added categorically: 'In no sense is it 'mission creep''.[97] Of course, it was. Hoon had gravely under-estimated his Prime Minister's willingness to support American military interventionism.

These first seeds of mission creep were announced, like all bad news, at the end of the speech. At the beginning of 2002, the British government found itself in an increasingly difficult but not unfamiliar position. Washington was entirely unimpressed with the British contribution in Afghanistan, dismissing ISAF as a sideshow to the war on terror. From the Bush administration's ungrateful perspective there was a mismatch between Blair's rhetoric and his willingness to actually contribute soldiers to fighting the remnants of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan – the only war that Washington cared about. Tony Blair, now being drawn into a secret trajectory to war in Iraq, had little option but to find troops – but from where? One option would have been re-task the Kabul based troops, but the handover between 2 Para and 1 Royal Anglian was already underway, and besides, such a re-tasking would have fatally undermined the ISAF mission. Another option was to deploy the army's standby battalion. At the time, this was 1 Royal Irish, but it was judged the unit was insufficiently prepared for undertaking such a demanding task. With inevitability, the baton passed to the Royal Marines.

As if pulling a rabbit out of the hat, Hoon told the Commons: 'We have held 45 Commando ready for offensive operations in Afghanistan for precisely this purpose.'[98] This was not strictly accurate, but two companies of 45 Commando were in the Indian Ocean aboard HMS *Ocean*, an amphibious assault ship that had taken station following the withdrawal of HMS *Fearless*. The deployment of HMS *Ocean* did not so much illustrate Britain's capacity to mount a serious expeditionary operation – as the Defence Secretary implied - as the manner in which the navy was being forced to juggle resources as a result of defence cuts. *HMS Ocean* was originally earmarked to carry sixteen helicopters to replace the sixteen useless Sea Harriers carried on HMS *Illustrious*, which had been deployed for show on Exercise Swift Sword. The plan to transfer aircraft then collided with the reality of a small fleet. HMS *Ocean*, the navy's only dedicated helicopter carrier had to return to Devonport for urgent repairs. HMS *Illustrious*, it was anticipated, would therefore have to remain on station in the Indian Ocean at least until the spring, before she in turn returned to Portsmouth for vital maintenance work. The forty year-old

HMS *Fearless* which had even less legs in her would also have to remain on station. The rapid collapse of the Taliban regime fortunately saved the Royal Navy from this eventuality. In the end, the repaired HMS *Ocean* became the single ship in the relief task force, protected by two escorts (HMS *York* and HMS *Campbeltown*), supported by three Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessels. This amounted to the very minimum combination of ships that could go by the name of an amphibious expeditionary task force, a manifestation of just how weakened the Royal Navy had become at the beginning of the 21st century.

To create a properly balanced land force the two companies of embarked marines would be joined by the remainder of the Commando who were sitting in Arbroath in Scotland, as well as by elements from 29 Commando Regiment, Royal Artillery, and 59 Independent Commando Squadron, Royal Engineers. The RAF would contribute three Chinooks to ferry the force. The justification for this deployment would be repeated by British politicians over the forthcoming years, with increasingly less credibility – Britain had to be in Afghanistan, because, 'Al Qaida and Taliban elements have the ability and the desire to launch attacks right into the heart of nations like ours' – despite the lack of any firm intelligence that this was the case at all.[99] This questionable justification was capped by a glib and dishonest assertion that would also become wearisomely familiar to the British public: 'Our exit strategy is that we will leave when the task is completed.'[100] The truth was that thirteen years later, Britain's 'exit strategy' – all exit and no strategy, as Kissinger quipped – would be entirely based on electoral calculations, financial constraints, and the imperative of acting in lock-step with Washington, not a judgement on whether the task had been completed. This was, of course, true of every other ISAF-contributing nation.

For the marines ostensibly despatched to chase al-Qaeda out of Afghanistan – Task Force Jacana - the experience proved an unsatisfactory business. The 1,700 strong battlegroup began deploying in early April and the final elements of the force withdrew at the end of July. Shortly after deploying, on 16 April, the Brigade Reconnaissance Force and 45 Commando deployed on a two day search mission – Operation Ptarmigan – south east of Kabul. The area the marines were tasked to search was largely barren and mountainous. Despite the bright springtime weather, it remained very cold, especially at night when temperatures plummeted. The intelligence was weak and nothing of significance was found. Following Operation Ptarmigan, a much more ambitious operation was planned in the same area – Operation Snipe – which ran for almost two weeks starting at the beginning of May. No coalition forces had visited the area and

marines stumbled on a large arms cache. In fact, hundreds of such caches could be found throughout Afghanistan but after the disappointment of Operation Ptarmigan, this felt like success. The cache was located inside a cave network and included over 100 mortars and recoilless anti-tank gun shells, several hundred rocket-propelled grenades, hundreds of anti-personnel mines, hundreds of artillery rounds and rockets, and thousands of small-arms and light anti-aircraft ammunition.[101] Demolition charges were emplaced and the cache was destroyed.

45 Commando had not long recovered from Operation Snipe when all four companies found themselves flown at short notice on 17 May, to Paktia Province, to support an Australian SAS squadron which had become heavily engaged by armed gangs. The Australians had been taking part in Operation Condor, an American-led operation to flush out suspected foreign fighters that had remained behind in Afghanistan's eastern provinces following the collapse of the Taliban regime. By the time the marines deployed, the enemy had melted away. For the next five days the marines poked about the remains of the insurgent camp and the surrounding hills before returning to their base at Bagram Airport. Perhaps the most memorable aspect of this operation was the 'swarms of gay local farmers'.[102] Or at any rate, this is how it seemed to the marines who found themselves accosted by over-friendly locals wearing make-up and with painted toe nails. That the villagers were reportedly keen to stroke the marines' blond hair probably helped to reinforce the perception.

The last major mission undertaken by 45 Commando was Operation Buzzard which saw the marines deploying to Khowst Province. Operation Buzzard ran from 29 May to 9 July, the longest single operation undertaken by Task Force Jacana. The difficulties of keeping the force re-supplied by helicopter for such an extended period were outweighed by the advantages of gaining better local intelligence through maintaining a constant presence on the ground. Although the marines encountered no elements of al-Qaeda they did stumble on evidence of past occupation in insurgent camps as well as weapon caches. One set of caches, dug into the side of a hill, was destroyed with demolition charges creating a spectacular wall of black mushroom clouds. It seemed a fitting way to end the task force's three month deployment in Afghanistan.

Although the MOD was keen to portray Task Force Jacana as a success, the marines were far more realistic in their perception of the mission in Afghanistan. The vastness of the country had impressed. 45 Commando was well aware that it was only leaving boot prints in a handful of hills and valleys. The rest of the country which the commandos only

saw from the air – the thousands of square kilometres of dramatic mountain ranges, deserts and fertile valleys – remained *terra incognita*. This highlighted a point persuasively argued by characters like Barbara Stapleton, a political advisor to the European Union Special Representative to Afghanistan, who enjoyed a privileged perspective and observed the ISAF mission unfold in the early years. Afghanistan needed a heavy footprint of international troops at the beginning but the very opposite happened because of the American obsession with the 'war on terror'. Confining the Europeans to Kabul fatally undermined Afghan confidence at a juncture when that confidence needed most reassurance.[103]

Task Force Jacana had escaped the constraint of remaining in Kabul because it had in effect been invited to take part in Rumsfeld's 'war lite' – a war fought by special force units and aerial precision strikes. The manner in which the Taliban regime had tumbled like a pack of cards had only served to reinforce a dogmatic belief that this was *the* way to wage war. The so-called Powell Doctrine of the First Gulf War, which involved the massing of vast conventional armies, had been turned on its head within a decade - so the proponents of 'war lite' argued - by 'the Revolution in Military Affairs' which made this new, smart war the only game in town. The problem with 'war lite', as it turned out, was that it was not decisive after all.

As far as the marines were concerned, the Taliban and al-Qaeda had not so much been beaten as simply vanished into the hills. The Americans themselves were discovering this, notably in Operation Anaconda, a half-bungled mission that resulted in a large number of casualties and some surprising resistance by a group of fighters. There was no reason why the Taliban and al-Qaeda could not simply lick their wounds, re-arm, and return. Indeed, how long would it be before the Afghans themselves turned against the foreigners? This view was shared by independent observers like Anthony Cordesman who warned soon after the Taliban collapse that there was no reason why the movement could not reconstitute and one day return.[104] In the post-Bonn euphoria, few were listening to these siren voices. In the context of the Afghanistan War, 45 Commando's deployment was ultimately trivial, but in the light of the Iraq War it was hugely important because it set a precedent of British acquiescence to Washington's demands for British 'boots on the ground' from which the Blair government could not back down.

If the Europeans, corralled in Kabul or taking part in fruitless counter-terrorist operations like 45 Commando were beginning to develop one perspective on the operation in Afghanistan, the Americans were developing quite another. By the summer, the few

hundred American special force soldiers had grown into a divisional-sized joint force. About 7,500 soldiers from 10th Mountain Division (whose commander notoriously commented: 'We don't really do mountains.') were deployed to Afghanistan. There were a further 1,000 American servicemen in Pakistan, 1,000 in Kyrgyzstan, 1,700 in Uzbekistan, and 13,000 afloat.[105] These two forces – ISAF and American forces committed to the continuing Operation Enduring Freedom – were pursuing quite different missions and the tensions were beginning to show. In testimony to the Defence Select Committee, ten years later, General Robert Fry neatly summed up the contradiction:

'Those two things were profoundly inimical to each other, and in fact to conduct a counter-terrorist campaign in that way was almost mutually exclusive to a peace support operation, because if you happen to be dropping bombs on people and killing them in significant numbers, they are unlikely to be susceptible to the blandishments of political accommodation.'[106]

On Capitol Hill, disunity over war aims became public. Influential senators like Joe Biden, Tom Daschle and John McCain questioned both the mission in Afghanistan and a growing suspicion that the Bush government was about to embark on further military operations in the Middle East. This was, of course, a reference to the Pentagon's preparations for war in Iraq, one of the worst kept secrets in history, and it provoked stinging criticism from Senator John Byrd:

'Instead of concentrating on completing our operations in Afghanistan, the Pentagon seems to be looking for opportunities to stay longer and expand our presence in the region. We seem to be good at developing entrance strategies but not in developing exit strategies.'

He could hardly have been more prescient.

By coincidence, NATO was due to hold a summit in November, in Prague, to formalise the accession of seven new members and it was clear to all participants the alliance were heading for a diplomatic showdown. Two key questions had to be addressed which would dog NATO in Afghanistan for many years, and neither had easy resolution. What exactly was the mission, and who was in charge? The Americans, appealing to good military principals, continued to argue for a unified command led by the United States. For the majority of Europeans, nervously hearing war drums beating over Iraq, this option was totally unacceptable. A multi-national leadership, the preferred European option, was equally unacceptable to the Americans after the fraught experience of Operation Allied

Force in Kosovo. If the allies were at odds over command arrangements they were also at odds over the mission. For the Pentagon, war came first. For the Europeans, reconstruction came first (albeit a small number of nations were now contributing special force units to assist in 'the Global War on Terror'). Predictions that the Prague Summit would lead to serious fractures in NATO – just over a year after the September 11 attacks – proved over-pessimistic. The organisation's eternal capacity to compromise saved the day, even if the outcomes were unsatisfactory from the point of view of the operation in Afghanistan.

The United States would continue to mount Operation Enduring Freedom, while NATO would assume leadership of the separate ISAF mission, with a reconstruction mandate. George Robertson, the NATO Secretary General appears to have played the deal maker role. Crudely, NATO needed a mission, relations with Washington needed to be repaired, and Afghanistan seemed a good fit. The European allies pledged to undertake a comprehensive review of their 'activities and working procedures', code for the lack of expeditionary force capabilities in their armed forces. For Donald Rumsfeld, who was frequently close to despair over European lack of military punch, this was a small victory. They also pledged to continue to support the operation in Afghanistan, but as a separate ISAF mission, with a reconstruction mandate. Keen to avoid any fighting, the Europeans unrealistically insisted that 'the responsibility for providing security and law and order throughout Afghanistan resides with the Afghans themselves'.[107] As a final sop, a divisional-sized NATO Rapid Reaction Force would be created for future contingencies (although even this proposal would require extensive American support). For the Americans, notwithstanding the new and renewed commitments from its European allies, the Prague Summit ultimately was a let-down. Compromising in a war was a royal road to ruin. Once again, the Europeans had failed to show mettle reinforcing the sense that America could only rely on her own resources, and perhaps a handful of willing allies. If the Prague Summit did not lead to the collapse of NATO it was because another war was about to detonate in the Middle East that would completely overshadow Operation Enduring Freedom and change the dynamics of this central Asian war. By the time the last lights were switched off in the conference halls in Prague, America, and her military ally Britain, were just four months away from invading a former foe: Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

The controversial and hugely divisive decision to topple the Ba'athist regime in Iraq would have profound consequences for the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. The flawed and exaggerated intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction – an American paranoia that had circulated in intelligence circles since before the first Gulf War – fatally compromised

Operation Iraq Freedom, and its British counterpart Operation Telic, even before the mismanaged intervention began to unravel. Public opinion in Europe turned against the very idea of invading Iraq before a single shot was fired, and European capitals, including London, witnessed some of the biggest protest marches ever recorded in the post-war era. Middle Eastern opinion was indignant, however loathed Saddam Hussein was. As the hour of invasion approached the cloth spun by the weavers in Washington and London became increasingly fabulous. It was a classic example of the Emperor's New Clothes: everybody was pretending to see the Weapons of Mass Destruction, because they believed everybody else was seeing them, and the moment was just waiting for a child to step out of the crowd and cry out: 'But there aren't any!' Unfortunately, nobody found the moral courage to do so. If it became increasingly clear as Iraq belatedly opened its doors to UN inspectors, that the country was in an awful, dilapidated state and posed a threat to no one, it also became transparent that the Bush administration was determined to depose Saddam Hussein regardless. It was a moment of idiocy, compounded by clumsiness, and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis would lose their lives or livelihoods as a result of the American-British invasion. While America floundered with her worse foreign policy decision since the Vietnam War, Iran grew in influence and the seeds were sown for the fracture of Iraq and its re-incarnation as a nursery for Islamist terrorism. A worse strategic outcome could not have been manufactured.

The consequences of Operation Iraqi Freedom were felt across Afghanistan and Pakistan. President Musharraf seems to have calculated the American switch of focus would imply a withdrawal from Afghanistan.[108] A probable American withdrawal was anticipated by the ISI even before the invasion of Iraq. This organisation continued to provide covert support to the Taliban even as it pledged support for America's war on terror.[109] Mullah Omar and the deposed Taliban hierarchy also expected American troops to withdraw within a short period. When it became obvious that America was not quitting but instead preparing to invade a second Muslim country, it seeded the conviction that this was nothing less than an assault on the *umma*, the Muslim nation, by the world's superpower. Mullah Omar's first public pronouncements and the Taliban's first attacks, post the regime's fall from power, date to this period. It was the invasion of Iraq that acted as the catalyst for the resurgence of the Afghan Taliban, a not unimportant point.

The decision to plan an invasion of Iraq was taken, it appears certain, concurrently with the decision to depose the Taliban. For military planners the possibility that America would become involved in two potentially major, regional wars was a headache. The

quick if partial success of Operation Enduring Freedom altered the chess board but not significantly. From the Pentagon's perspective the ideal scenario was to coax the remainder of the Europeans into acting like Britain, as America's charlady in Afghanistan, and to shoulder the burden of providing the majority of troops for what would become a side-show operation following the invasion of Iraq. America would continue to lead the operation and provide the necessary aircraft and communications infrastructures without which ISAF could not operate coherently, but it would not tie down its forces in Afghanistan. This was why the Prague Summit had mattered. Although the Americans failed to convince the Europeans to adopt this course of action they did not come away entirely empty handed. Behind the scenes, hard-nosed negotiations continued against the backdrop of a shortening timeline to war. The agreement, when it was finally reached, could not have been more tightly choreographed.

Even as Operation Iraqi Freedom was launched, American and European negotiators agreed in April 2003 to roll out the ISAF operation across Afghanistan in a series of four stages, over three years. The impetus behind what would become the expanded and mired ISAF mission did not therefore come from Afghans. It was basically the by-product of internecine Western tensions and NATO politics.

The immediate consequence of this momentous decision was the formal establishment of the uncomplimentary military operations in Afghanistan, which in effect had been running since January in the previous year. European compliance in this matter had a variety of motivations which had little to do with Afghanistan, or a war on terrorism. For eastern European countries, supporting America was a way of demonstrating their new-found NATO credentials. America, in turn, would requite their enthusiasm for war with diplomatic and military favouritism. A country like Germany needed to mend bridges after her foreign minister angrily criticised American belligerence. France also needed to mend bridges after snubbing America in the UN, provoking a wave of childish, anti-French invective in the American media. For some countries, Afghanistan was a way of dodging the far less palatable option of supporting an American operation in Iraq. Spain's incoming Socialist government would announce the immediate withdrawal of Spanish troops from Mesopotamia, post the invasion, but tried to save face by pledging support to the American mission in Afghanistan (it little helped and relations remained icy between the two countries for the next few years). The importance of being seen to contribute, rather than making the hard contribution of 'boots on the ground' created an embarrassing diplomatic spectacle. On 11 August 2003, NATO officially assumed command of ISAF with the operation run from the Allied Joint Force Command (JFC) Headquarters in

Brunssum under command of a German General, Egon Ramms. 1,700 soldiers from forty nations crammed into the new headquarters in Kabul – more soldiers than the European NATO countries had actually deployed in the rest of the country at this stage. It was painfully obvious this was an invitation to a party no country wanted to be seen to be declining, but nobody wanted to step onto the dance floor either.

NATO needed a plan for expanding its mission and the mechanism for the subsequent roll-out of ground forces would be based around the concept of the newly-coined Provincial Reconstruction Teams, or PRTs (the first was established by US forces in Gardez). According to Jack Fairweather, the original concept appears to have been coined by the future CGS Nick Carter, then serving as a colonel in the ISAF headquarters.[110] In principal, the idea was simple. Each of the larger NATO countries would individually, or jointly, assume responsibility for a geographical area of Afghanistan, establishing a regional command headquarters and logistics base to support the PRT. These would be the so-called 'lead nations'. Smaller NATO countries would be expected to contribute forces in support of the lead nations. Any country (such as Britain) deploying a sizeable task force would also establish its own national headquarters, which implied a third layer of command. In total, from Brunssum in the Netherlands to a brigade in Afghanistan, there would be four layers of headquarters. In the case of a national headquarters, this would be answering not only to the ISAF chain of command but also to its own strategic headquarters and ministry of defence. For British forces, this was the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ) at Northwood. Irregular units like 22 SAS answered to their own chain of command, and ultimately to the Prime Minister. As if these elaborate command arrangement were not complex enough there was also the direct and indirect influence of operations being conducted under the name of Operation Enduring Freedom, within these newly allocated ISAF regional commands. Nations that flatly refused to be associated with Operation Enduring Freedom could not prevent operations conducted under American auspices from taking place within their regional commands. As these were invariably special force operations, they were seldom informed that an operation was taking place at all. In the case of Britain, the military contribution was already compromised as British forces had established a foot in both camps. The answer to the question – was Britain a contributor to ISAF or an auxiliary to the American Operation Enduring Freedom? – could not be comfortably answered. To add to the friction, national caveats – the rules that stipulated what any particular contingent may or may not do – ran to dozens of pages. No military operation in modern history had been attempted under such convoluted command arrangements.

For ease of planning, Afghanistan was divided like a cake into five geographical divisions which ultimately became the five ISAF regional commands. At the end of December 2003, NATO authorised the Supreme Allied Commander, General James Jones, to initiate the expansion of ISAF by taking over command of the German-led Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Kunduz. The other eight existing PRTs remained under the command of Operation Enduring Freedom. In the north, Germany would retain the role of lead nation, supported by Sweden and Norway. Four PRTs would be established in Regional Command North, including the PRT that the British had already begun to set up in Mazar-e Sharif, a month before ISAF officially took command of the operation. The other three were established at Meymana, Feyzabad and Baghlan with the process more or less completed by October 2004. This was taken as marking the conclusion of ISAF's Stage 1 expansion.

Italy, based in Herat and supported by Spain, assumed the role of lead nation on the Afghan-Iranian border, in what would be called Regional Command West. This was part of ISAF's Stage 2 expansion, announced in February 2005 but not actually started until May 2006. Four PRTs would be established in this mostly barren and neglected corner of the country (at Herat, Farah, Chaghcharan and Qala-e Naw). In eastern Afghanistan, where American forces were already heavily committed in Operation Enduring Freedom, an American Regional Command East would be established, based on Bagram Air Base. Flush with funds, the Americans proposed setting up thirteen PRTs. France – NATO's misfit, although this was about to change under the Sarkozy presidency – agreed to take over the multinational brigade in Kabul. To fit in with the overall scheme, this original ISAF deployment was renamed Regional Command Capital. In the south west corner of the country, the Pashtun heartlands, the Netherlands agreed to assume the lead nation role by establishing a Regional Command South. This was ISAF's Stage 3 expansion, announced in December 2005 but only formally assumed in July 2006. To assist the Dutch, the British agreed to set up a headquarters in Kandahar (where British Tornados had already been operating within an American infrastructure). Four PRTs would be established in Regional Command South, including one in a town called Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital of the backwater Helmand. ISAF's Stage 4 expansion, in which international forces assumed command of eastern Afghanistan, would be completed in October 2006.

From about the summer of 2003, until the summer of 2005, the British assumption - if military planners were thinking that far ahead in detail, given the unravelling of British military operations in southern Iraq – appears to have been that Britain would ultimately

take over Kandahar. This was what Major General David Richards, who would assume the ISAF command in the summer of 2006 presumed would be the natural evolution of the British involvement in Afghanistan. Timetable slips and jostling between contributor nations would confound this assumption and push the British west to the province of Helmand. Richard's assumption was not entirely misplaced. There was an argument that the single strategic chess move that ISAF had to make in all south west Afghanistan was to secure the city of Kandahar – which is the one move it did not make. Deprived of a spiritual and physical capital the Taliban may have remained a marginalised rural insurgency. For the Taliban – and certainly for any Pashtun – Kandahar was Afghanistan's centre of power. Anything less would have been akin to suggesting to a Medieval English pretender to the throne that he should march on Bristol rather than London.

The Taliban had elevated Kandahar as their capital city but, like any diverse city, she had not entirely yielded to their ways. The simplistic characterisation of a pro-Taliban Kandahar was in fact far from the truth: power was held by threat, not popular approbation. The manner in which the Taliban civic authorities vanished overnight with the collapse of the regime was an indication of just how tenuous their control had been of a city that was regarded by outsiders as their stronghold. It was not until 2009, with the arrival of General Stanley McChrystal, that Kandahar's importance was understood but by then it was too late. The city had once again become a corrupt and violent nest of vipers.

In Kabul, in the spring of 2002, 2 Para had been replaced by 1 Royal Anglian. For the Royal Anglians, the second infantry unit to serve on Operation Fingal, life in Kabul was humdrum, if not boring. Conditions for the soldiers slowly improved as military engineers and civilian contractors began the significant task of building permanent structures for the burgeoning multi-national force. There was routine patrolling to fill the time, in a peaceful if shattered city, and the weather improved. A Private Darren George was killed in April, following an accidental discharge of a weapon, but this was about the only incident of note to report. On 3 June – the occasion of the Queen's Jubilee - a beacon was lit on a hill overlooking the city by the youngest soldier in the regiment, a Private Watts. The Royal Anglians duly handed over to Turkish counterparts and it seemed the British commitment to ISAF had been successfully concluded, at least for another year. A small support element remained in Kabul but this was not an onerous commitment. Returning units fed back positive if dull reports. The British are good at this game was the main message that was received in Whitehall. There was hubris over the British 'can-do' attitude compared with the reticence of European partners. Before the year closed two more British soldiers serving within the ISAF support element would be killed. Sergeant Robert Busuttil and

Corporal John Gregory, both serving with the Royal Logistic Corps, died from gunshot wounds at Kabul International Airport, on 17 August. This incident was not a result of hostile enemy action and they would be only British fatalities for the next two years. Overall the picture painted of Afghanistan was that of a mostly benign if impoverished country. Compared to the drama that was about to unfold in Iraq, Afghanistan seemed a cakewalk.

In March 2003, a sister regiment, 2 Royal Anglian, again took up the reins of Operation Fingal. This unit would remain in Afghanistan until October when it would be replaced by 2 Royal Gurkha Rifles. In May, the Defence Secretary announced in a written statement that from July the United Kingdom would lead a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Mazar-e Sharif and the five surrounding provinces. To signal this new phase in the British mission the operational codename, Operation Fingal, was complemented by a second codename, Operation Tarrock. The former referred to the Kabul-based British contingent and the latter to PRT operations in northern Afghanistan.

One year later the codename would change again. Unlike the American practice of literal, two-word codenames (such as Operation Enduring Freedom), the British used a random word generator to create single code words. In 2004, the computer threw up the surname of a 16th century metaphysical poet – Herrick. Nobody could have guessed at the time how weighted a word this would become in the British Army's consciousness. Unlike the parallel operation in Iraq (Operation Telic), it had the virtue that it was not a name that could be readily subverted ('Telic' became jokingly known as 'Tell Everyone Leave Is Cancelled', a reflection of how the army was struggling to meet its manpower commitments).

The foundations for the Mazar-e-Sharif PRT were duly laid in July 2003 (a smaller outpost in Maymenah would be added later in the year). A New Zealand contingent followed suit and established a PRT in nearby Bamiyan. The Gurkhas manned this first British PRT from October 2003 until April 2004. The Urdu-speaking Gurkhas had a natural affinity with the Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras of northern Afghanistan. With some pride, the battalion reported that it had made good progress. The Gurkhas patrolled and showed 'presence' while projects were focussed on building up the local government (rather than building clinics or schools, the later staples of reconstruction efforts). A potential flare-up between rival warlords was successfully defused that summer. Military observation teams were despatched around the countryside. A quick reaction force undertook a handful of arrest operations with the local police. Kabul's streets were

patrolled and trainers were attached to an American-led Task Force Phoenix which provided ‘ETTs’ (Embedded Training Teams) at the Afghan Army NCO School. A modest number of Quick Impact Projects was started. Over the deployment, there was just one fatality. On 28 January 2004, a twenty-three year old Territorial Army soldier, Private Jonathan Kitulagoda, serving with the Rifle Volunteers, was killed in a suicide attack. Four of his comrades were injured in the attack. At the time, such incidents remained relatively rare, but his death was a reminder that Afghanistan could be a dangerous place.

The Gurkhas in turn was relieved by the Green Howards whose tour lasted until the autumn of 2004. This battalion formed the first Afghanistan Roulement Infantry Battalion, or ARIB. The experience, unfortunately, proved a disappointment. The Green Howards found an ISAF mission that was complex, confused and under-resourced. The plan was that the UK PRT, based on the ARIB, would be military-led and deploy for up to two years. It would initially comprise some fifty troops who would liaise with Afghan military forces in the region. These latter would provide the PRT’s support and protection. Civilian staff from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DfID) would be responsible for providing political and development advice respectively. The government made just one million pounds available to its development adviser in the Mazar-e-Sharif PRT in 2004. This was the equivalent of sending two coach-loads of soldiers with a kitbag of tender, to an area the size of Scotland, and instructing them to fix the place. This was much less money than a single opium poppy growing valley made.

If the British were indulging in military ‘tokenism’ (like their allies), there were some glimmers of hope. Regular consultation exercises were established with UN agencies and NGOs, to avoid duplication of effort, but there was a certain amount of friction between these various agencies. Despite these good if very modest intentions, the British PRT ‘ultimately amounted to crisis management’.[111] One problem was tensions between the military and the civilians from the FCO and DfID, a foretaste of what would follow in Helmand. The second problem was the scale of the effort. When the British handed over the PRTs to Swedish and Norwegian contingents just over a year after establishing the bases, the overwhelming majority of Afghans in the five provinces would not have even been aware that a British military force had co-existed amongst them. It had been a near-invisible, token military deployment designed to appease NATO politics rather than address the needs of the Afghan people. This same pattern of non-committal was being repeated throughout Afghanistan by the other ISAF partners.

The sluggish expansion of the ISAF mission was further exacerbated by a collapse in interest in the whole problem of Afghanistan on the part of the Bush administration. In the spring of 2003 Operation Iraqi Freedom had been hailed as a great military victory. Just one year later American troops found themselves mired in a vicious sectarian war that was in danger of spiralling out of control. The size of the challenge facing America in Iraq, coupled with the strategic importance of the country, completely trumped the perceived backwater of Afghanistan. As with so many wars in the past, Afghanistan was in danger of becoming a forgotten war. Without American pull, the ISAF donkey was ambling.

Notwithstanding the halting progress being made by ISAF, it was clear that a second international conference would have to held to co-ordinate the mission and set goals for the next five years. The Berlin Conference held in early April 2004 brought together donor countries, as well as ISAF-contributing nations, under one tent and in a growing mood of uneasiness. As with all the conferences held on Afghanistan during the first Karzai government it began with an inventory of false and self-deluding successes. Two Loya Jirgas had been held: the first had established the country's new constitution, and the second had confirmed Karzai as the unelected president. In fact, the first Emergency Loya Jirga had been a shoddy affair manipulated by the US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad and the UN chief Lakhdar Brahimi. In the estimation of Afghan expert Thomas Ruttig, it was at this Loya Jirga that the West began to lose the hearts and minds of Afghans who had trusted in the international mission.[112]

At the conclusion of the war, the BBC would screen a two-part history entitled *When the Lion Roars*. It was a measure of the self-delusion or perhaps ignorance of Westerners that a personality such as McColl would later describe the meeting as a 'wonderful, wonderful event'. It was not. It was a disaster, as experts like Ruttig pointed out.

The second constitutional Loya Jirga was similarly manipulated by Khalilzad who imposed a presidential system of government on Afghanistan, despite almost half the delegates strongly objecting to the proposed constitutional arrangement. As damagingly, a Single Non-Transferable Voting (SNTV) system was imposed (only shared by the Pitcairn Islands, Vanuatu, and oddly, Jordan).[113] Karzai went along with this because it fractured political opposition and enhanced his power. In this respect, Khalilzad played the same damaging role as the luckless Paul Bremner in Iraq, unrolling conceptions of Western governance against the local grain.

A rudimentary but crucially not independent judiciary was established, as well as a central bank (desperately needed as much donor money was simply being transferred to

the IMF, which needed a trusted financial partner in Afghanistan). The cumulative financial commitments made at the Berlin Conference for the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan totalled $8.2 billion for the fiscal years 2004 – 2007, with the US by far the largest donor ($4.4 billion). At Afghan and British insistence more money would be channelled through the central government as direct budget support, or as contributions to the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), and to a Law and Order Trust Fund (LOTFA). There was now also a firm commitment to hold parliamentary and presidential elections in September.[114] This new, brushed up and polished Afghanistan was described as 'free, stable, democratic, market-orientated and a respecter of human rights', as if centuries of obscurantism and tribal violence had been swept away by the civilising influence of a handful of Western soldiers and some UNAMA officials. [115]

The bunkum of the Berlin Conference could not mask European fears over becoming sucked into an American war. Once again, the Europeans emphasised that law and order was a matter for the Afghans, even though Afghanistan lacked any credible security forces at this stage. Neither was ISAF prepared to get involved in tackling the opium trade, although it was obvious to everyone that the most visible by-product of the American-led invasion was a boom in the cultivation of the opium poppy. For near neighbours like Russia, this was a disaster (notwithstanding that the Soviet-Afghan War had created the problem in the first place). Russia's deputy head of its drug control organisation was keen to point out that heroin consumption had grown by a factor of twenty-three in the last five years and the Russian Federation now hosted a population of four million addicts.[116] He laid the blame for this on NATO, with some pique.

Despite the rhetoric at the Berlin Conference, the expansion of ISAF forces proved a far more difficult and slow process due to the growing realisation that any forces deployed to the south might be drawn into open fighting against a growing insurgency.

The British, at this stage, had no immediate plans for redeploying south. On 29 June 2004, in Istanbul, Blair announced that Britain would resume leadership of the ISAF operation, but by deploying HQ ARRC to Kabul, not by making any specific commitment in south-west Afghanistan. This was a politically motivated decision to avoid further commitments in Iraq – rather than a strategic decision taken by the MOD – but it would have profound implications for the army that would be required to re-balance from Basra to Afghanistan.[117] Within one year of the invasion of Iraq, Operation Telic had become a toxic liability for the Labour party, acutely so after confirmation that there were no

Weapons of Mass Destruction. For beleaguered Prime Minister Blair the imperative was to get out, but without snubbing the Americans. Afghanistan provided a legitimate escape route: a ‘bad war’ would be swapped for a ‘good war’, so some reasoned.

The significant costs of setting up forward operating bases, or FOBs, was also stalling the ISAF expansion. The presidential election was nonetheless held in October 2004 against the backdrop of uncertain security. The event was embraced with genuine enthusiasm on the part of the Afghan people and in the event there was little violence, despite Taliban threats that the elections would be disrupted. Electoral fraud was brushed under the carpet. President Karzai, the only real contender to the presidential post, initially failed to secure the necessary 50 per cent majority. The newly-agreed constitution pointed to a second-round vote, but Western backers had no appetite for seeing their man challenged in this way, so the inconvenient constitution was bypassed by the very people who had imposed it on Afghanistan. This lesson in realpolitik was not lost on Afghans.[118] Possibly 70 per cent of registered voters participated in the 2004 presidential election (8.1 million votes of which 40 per cent were women), which was as close as Afghanistan was going to get to universal suffrage and a higher voting participation than several European countries. These voters, ultimately, were cheated.

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On 5 December 2004, with great fanfare, President Hamid Karzai was duly sworn in as Afghanistan’s first democratic president. The international community congratulated the new president but the fact remained that he was taking over a narco-state. Exactly a week after the inauguration ceremony a UN sponsored conference was held in Kabul to address the Afghan narcotics trade. It was attended by flocks of Afghan and international delegates. The US grandly pledged $780 million to assist Afghan counter-narcotics operations. The newly installed president boldly promised the delegates ‘we will fight the poppy’ but the facts of the opium trade were sobering. Over 60 per cent of Afghanistan’s GDP was accounted for by this drug. A record-breaking 130,000 hectares of the opium poppy had been grown in the previous planting season - Afghanistan now accounted for 87 per cent of the world’s opium supply.[119] The message from the Berlin Conference had reached Afghanistan, but other than throwing money at the problem, no credible strategy was offered, not least by Britain, volunteered as the lead counter-narcotics nation by Blair. The boom in opium poppy cultivation would continue for another three years before a market glut struck the trade.

The opium poppy trade was just one of a myriad of severe challenges facing

Afghanistan across all areas of governance, but the presidential election had the effect of creating a false and over-optimistic sense of progress. The much-heralded Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) process – sponsored by Japan – proved to be a complete failure. All the former warlords, without exception, were left in power, some with enhanced positions. Notorious characters like the later Vice President Abdul Karim Khalili, who headed the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG), proved assiduous in collecting illegal weapons, while maintaining his own militia equipped with American-supplied weapons.[120] The outgoing commander of the ISAF VI mission, Lieutenant General Jean-Louis Py, lauded the definite establishment of democracy from his bubble in Kabul and confidently predicted that Afghanistan was on the right track to peace and progress. He was hardly in a position to make this judgement. ISAF had about 8,000 troops in Afghanistan (from thirty-seven contributing nations) and very few of these had ever strayed outside the immediate environs of the capital, or indeed the ISAF HQ. The parliamentary and district elections due to be held in September 2005 would provide an opportunity for widespread back-scratching and corruption as the Kabul government sought to strengthen its position by cutting deals with former warlords and other unsavoury characters. ISAF, blinded by the apparent success of Afghanistan's first presidential election, seemed oblivious to this next certain evolution of Afghan 'democracy'.

Instead, ISAF threw itself into what European armies did best – safe, peace support operations. The numbers were certainly impressive. ISAF shifted over 1,000 tonnes of ballot papers, 403 tonnes of polling station furniture, 150,000 ballot boxes, 120,000 bottles of indelible ink, 150,000 voting screens, and 34,000 polling stations throughout the national territory. Fifteen Antonov heavy lift aircraft had to be chartered to transport the ballot papers from printing houses in Britain and Austria to Afghanistan. Once in Afghanistan, a network of eighteen cargo aircraft was used to ferry the ballot materials across country, supported by a fleet of 1,200 trucks. Afghanistan's long-suffering domestic animals found themselves surprising participants in the democratic process: 1,247 donkeys, 306 horses and 24 camels completed the deliveries to the more remote areas.[121] Despite the backroom dealing, corruption and currying of favours, it was a success of sorts. Half the Afghan population voted in the parliamentary and provincial council elections.[122] Women, who had been excluded from society by the Taliban, were now in government and formed a quarter of the total number of legislators sitting in the 351-member National Assembly. The enterprise had taken four years to complete, but it

seemed, at last, to be on its way.

This, at least, was the official view. The reality was quite different. Around 80 per cent of the members of the Lower House (Wolesi Jirga) were the old power brokers: war lords, mujahidin and local strong men.[123] The quarter of seats reserved for women and other minorities were in fact a reserve quota imposed by Westerners. But for this quota, the entire legislature may well have been hijacked by the usual crooks. The single non-transferable voting system, deliberately designed to break up powerful blocks had the unintended effect of creating a fissiparous and hopelessly unruly parliament.

Any visitor to Kabul over those four years would have witnessed visible changes to the capital. Changes were also evident across country as the provincial capitals and rural communities reaped the rewards of Afghanistan's peace dividend after almost three decades of warfare. Over 2.3 million refugees returned from Pakistan and Iran.[124] A new currency was introduced replacing a confusing basket of mostly worthless local currencies that had emerged during the civil war years. The vital first step of connecting Afghanistan to the internet was taken with the Afghan Transitional Administration gaining legal and technical control of the 'dot.af' domain. Mobile telephone contracts were awarded and Roshan towers (named after the company that captured the biggest slice of the market) began to appear all across Afghanistan. Afghans proved enthusiastic mobile telephone users and the spread of this form of communication was one of the undoubted success stories of the reconstruction process. It would later prove vital in tracking insurgents.

The strategic Salang Tunnel connecting Kabul with north-west Afghanistan, which had been closed since the fighting in 1998, was finally re-opened. In the south, the 500 kilometre ring road connecting Kabul to Kandahar was also re-opened. Although not entirely free from the occasional banditry and illegal checkpoints, this American-built highway was at least safer than it had been in many years. At the beginning of 2004, the first Western bank (Standard Chartered Bank) opened a branch in Kabul. This would encourage the establishment of numerous local banks. Four would emerge as the dominant players, fed, inevitably, with laundered drug money. The collapsed education system re-inflated. About 4.2 million children who had enjoyed an extended school holiday during the civil war found themselves back at school. Some of the schools were no more than tents and many of the teachers were barely qualified to teach, but it was a start and there was a real thirst among ordinary Afghans to better themselves with an education. The health system – such as it existed – also enjoyed a transfusion of Western aid, but it was too little to make more than small, local differences. Hospitals and clinics still struggled

from a lack of resources, and anyone who could (including the Taliban) went to Pakistan if they needed serious medical treatment. Mortality rates remained appallingly high. Even accepting the self-serving Western propaganda with due caution, it seemed the patient was gradually recovering. Afghanistan (which still mostly meant Kabul), was booming. Officially, the country experienced a 30 per cent hike in economic growth in first two years following the collapse of the Taliban regime. It was no wonder the 2004 USAID brochure on Afghanistan was entitled *Afghanistan Reborn* and came with a splash of photographs and statistics portraying a central Asian country rising phoenix-like from the curse of war.

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The British lead in reconstruction and development was assumed by the recently-created Department for International Development. DfID's charter rested on an act of parliament, the 2002 International Development Act. This act was drafted in support of the so-called 'UN Millennium Goals' and included a rosary of developmental goals such as achieving a 'reduction in poverty', 'sustainable development'; and 'improving the welfare of the population'. These were not aims that anyone could particularly disagree with but they produced violent disagreement on how they should be achieved. Hell hath no fury like government agencies, NGOs and aid organisations fighting over pots of money, and arguing over how to do 'good'. And picking arguments with soldiers.

From 2001-2006, DfID would claim to spend over £500 million on reconstruction and development in Afghanistan, making it the second-largest donor after the US. In one of the last acts by the outgoing Tony Blair, Britain agreed to commit a further £330 million from 2006-2009. Regardless of the true aid sums it was clear from the outset that DfID stood out from the other donor agencies. Unlike the Americans who believed reconstruction should follow the military operations, DfID took the view that the priority task was to stand up a working, centralised, Afghan government. This went by the euphemism 'capacity-building'. While it was accepted that Afghanistan needed a credible government in Kabul, the majority of donors were sceptical that pumping money into Kabul was the best way to get Afghanistan back on its feet. The problem with DfID's stance was that it wholly ignored Afghan culture and was wildly unrealistic. As CSIS author George Hyman sentenced in a grisly post-mortem a decade later, most Afghans had little or no experience of central government in their daily lives. They did not expect or want it. The West, led by organisations like DfID, was attempting to set up far more 'government' than rural Afghans cared for, wanted, or needed.[125] DfID would court controversy in other ways

which would become critical after the British deployed to Helmand.

At the outset the ISAF mission, DfID contributed $2 million towards reconstruction, but this trivial sum came with caveats. Rather than viewing itself as a joint partner with the army in Britain's foreign policy, DfID took the dogmatic view that no funds could be used 'to contribute to the military effectiveness of the British Army'. As the only effective task that 2 Para and later 1 Royal Anglian could possibly undertake was some light, Third World do-goodery (the Quick Impact Projects that DfID objected to) this somewhat undermined the very purpose of the soldiers. Furthermore, DfID took the view that the British Army should be treated like any other NGO bidding for funds. The professional NGOs knew the abracadabra spells needed to unlock DfID's treasure chest and get hold of British taxpayer's money (a 'Holistic Female Empowerment Action Program' was hardly likely to trip off a paratrooper's tongue), so this put the soldiers at a disadvantage. In an unnecessarily insulting gesture, DfID also refused to delegate any financial authority to McColl, which placed him in an embarrassing position as his German subordinate – a colonel - turned up with €600,000 in his pockets. Lastly, to the enormous frustration of the soldiers who were keen to achieve results quickly, DfID was gelidly slow in releasing funds.

The real problem, however, was that spend on bullets quickly outpaced spend on aid. In 2001-2002 the overall cost of operations in Afghanistan was £221 million.[126] In the following year it jumped again to £331 million. More funds had already been expended in the first two years of military operations (when the British force fluctuated around 1,000 strong) than were pledged to assist in reconstruction over five years. Over the next two years, when a drawdown saw the British force reduced to a weak battalion, the cost of operations still exceeded £100 million. In 2005-2006, the year before Task Force Helmand deployed, the cost of operations doubled. It subsequently tripled. In total, military operations outspent reconstruction by a factor of three. After the British task force swelled in size to about 10,000 strong, the cost of military operations began to be measured in billions of pounds (roughly £5 billion annually). As a Congressional Research Service report later noted, it was costing about $270,000 to keep a single Western soldier in Afghanistan for a year. Over the same period, $66 was being spent on an Afghan.[127] The war budget had grown between 30-40 times larger than the aid budget. If the intention was to reconstruct Afghanistan, then the wrong people were getting the money. These figures clearly showed that Britain was already becoming embroiled in a war, not a euphemistic 'stabilisation operation'.

Another problem facing Afghanistan, and its Western backers, was that the growth provoked by Western aid was highly unbalanced. The Afghan government was almost wholly dependent on the oxygen of aid with all the pitfalls that such a dependency entailed. Corruption became rife within the state sector undermining efforts to build a stable Afghan government. As little as a quarter of the aid money actually stayed in Afghanistan and possibly as much as a third vanished into the pockets of security contractors. The vital injection of private investment failed to take off due to security concerns (the same problem would be experienced in Iraq creating a society even more dependent on state employment than under Saddam Hussein's regime). In 2003, private investment amounted to a paltry $50 million. By the time the British deployed to Helmand it had only grown to about $400 million. Trade with neighbouring countries had collapsed in 2001 – just $26 million's worth of goods was exported from Pakistan to Afghanistan. By 2005, the centuries-old trade routes had been restored across the porous border and total trade between the two countries rose to $1.2 billion.[128] Trucking mafias dominated this trade and not all it was licit.

The third major problem was the phenomenon of hollow pledges, an especially virulent disease at international donor conferences. The fate of the Afghanistan Stabilisation Program (ASP) provided the perfect example.[129] This program was launched in 2005 and it attracted over $36 million from DfID. The six international donors supporting the ASF then found reasons to back off, or to significantly curtail their financial commitments (including DfID that withdrew $10 million from the pot). By 2010, it was estimated that in fact more than $350 million would be required, over a four year period, to implement ASP successfully. Just over $5 million was committed. Like so many other programs in Afghanistan, ASP withered in the infertile soil of false promises made to generate favourable headlines at international conferences. It was more than probable that the individuals involved in these failed programs knew perfectly well they would not take off. A culture of deceit was so institutionalised in the Western aid industry they were allowed to run anyway, before dying unnatural deaths.

The last challenge was Afghanistan's deeply entrenched gun culture. By ISAF's own reckoning, Afghanistan was still a country awash with ammunition and armed militias. Under the UN and Afghan Government's Disarmament, Demobilisation and Rehabilitation (DDR) programme 62,000 fighters had been disarmed and over 22,000 weapons and 200,000 items of ammunition had been collected. These were almost certainly misleading numbers. The reward money offered for demobilisation was

insulting. Afghans were being paid to hand in weapons, which they were happy to do as a high estimate suggested that there were as many as ten million weapons circulating in the country. Demobilisation for many thousands simply became a way of making a quick buck by handing in an old AK-47, before re-joining a militia. In Helmand, demobilisation was not even attempted and no weapons were collected. Even if the demobilisation figures were accepted, this still left an estimated 50,000 to 80,000 armed Afghans who were technically members of an illegal militia. Nobody could say with certainty whether these militias would back ISAF as it unrolled its expansion plan. Nobody considered their reintegration into legitimate Afghan security forces a priority. Indeed, in a move that would mirror the disastrous dismantling of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, the US government refused to fund an Afghan transitional army based on the militias, causing the collapse of the surviving rump of the army. [130] The establishment of an indigenous army would have to start from zero again, as happened in Iraq.

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The Afghan transitional army in fact did not quite die, but mutated into a dark Afghan comedy. The Tajik Commander in Chief (Marshal Fahim Khan) appointed thirty-eight generals, thirty-seven of which were Tajiks, and thirty-five of which belonged to his own clan militia. Of 100 generals across the transitional army, ninety belonged to Fahim's militia. These generals commanded no troops because ISAF had trained just one battalion of the new Afghan National Army (ANA) by the summer of 2003. As a consequence of all this mismanagement, thousands of armed young men who might have been swept into an Afghan army drifted instead into criminality and ultimately an insurgency. The state of the Afghan police, on whose reputation so much would later depend, was even worse. A measure of the lack of seriousness of ISAF's efforts in this area can be gauged by the fact that by the summer of 2003, Britain had offered some radios and Germany eight patrol cars to help build-up the Afghan police.[131] To make matters worse, an American obsession with pursuing imaginary terrorists - and stupidly labelling innocent Afghans as terrorists - led to the empowerment of the old militias, now co-opted as allies in this false war. The wily warlords did not hesitate in grabbing funding, businesses, and even reconstruction projects, all in the name of defeating 'terrorism'. Some even formed pseudo-NGOs as fronts for milking the American dollar machine.[132]

Tens of thousands of tons of high explosives were also still believed to be at large.[133] An estimated 737 million square metres of mined areas presented a daily hazard to ordinary Afghans. Between five to ten Afghans were stepping on a landmine every day, of

which half were children (this in a country with half a million widows, over 30,000 amputees, and where a staggering 4 cent of the population was estimated to be war disabled in some way or other). De-mining actually received a setback during the initial phase of Operation Enduring Freedom. In a cynical move, the Taliban exploited the disorder to seize eighty vehicles belonging to MAPA (Mine Action Program for Afghanistan), and millions of pounds of equipment were stolen. Air strikes also contributed to the damage: the DAFA HQ (De-Mining Agency for Afghanistan); the mine detection dog training centre in Kabul; and the ATC (Afghan Technical Consultants) offices, were all bombed killing staff, animals and destroying vehicles.[134] By the time the British task force arrived in Helmand in March 2006, 31,000 tonnes of munitions, in 860 caches had been found but there were still many more waiting to be uncovered. These ranged from old stockpiles thrown in the back of ISO containers to large stashes concealed in bunkers.[135] As late as 2008, the Kabul-based battalion was still uncovering scores of old caches - 671 mortar rounds, 478 rockets, 145 grenades, and 117 mines were decommissioned that summer in a district that ostensibly had been secured seven years previously.[136] Within this volatile and largely unknown landscape, ISAF boasted that it would ‘flex north, look west, and move south’.

For the British in the north, the Stage 1 expansion of ISAF had been a relatively smooth affair. In September 2004, six Harrier GR.7s were deployed to Kandahar to support Operation Enduring Freedom. These would represent the first steps of what would become a significant RAF presence in Afghanistan. In the late autumn of 2004, the Green Howards ARIB at the Mazar-e Sharif PRT was relieved by the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters. This was the first unit to serve in Afghanistan under the new operational codename, Operation Herrick 1. The official date of the start of the operation was 1 October. The ‘Woofers’ as they were known, returned to Britain in March 2005, unimpressed by the evolving operation. Worthwhile intelligence was almost non-existent. The fleet of vehicles deployed in Afghanistan was inappropriate, unreliable and too small. Communications were terrible – civilian mobile telephone became the default means used to ensure that messages were passed. It was rumoured that pilots resorted to painting mobile telephone numbers on the undersides of their aircraft. Most damningly, the soldiers complained of the lack of helicopters. To constrain costs, the government had curtailed sending helicopters to support the British PRT in northern Afghanistan. This meant the British were dependant on two German helicopters that would only fly under restrictive national caveats. It was a completely unsatisfactory situation and it meant that British

soldiers were extremely wary of placing themselves in situations where they might require a casualty evacuation.

The Gurkhas relieved the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters for their second tour of Afghanistan in as many years and found that none of the problems raised by the returning units were being addressed. Operation Herrick 2 evolved into a story of good intentions undermined by a lack of resources. Vehicles were literally falling apart. Authorisation was granted to procure local 4x4 SUVs. The lack of a robust communications infrastructure was seriously affecting operations. Faced with patrolling an area of roughly 500,000 square kilometres without a single helicopter was completely unrealistic. This was military 'tokenism' at its worst. The British – like the remainder of the ISAF contributors – seemed to be following a little too literally Woody Allen's quip that 90 per cent of life is just showing up.

The last British infantry battalion to serve in central Afghanistan, before the re-deployment to Helmand, was the Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire Light Infantry.[137] This battalion's deployment coincided with a spike of unrest near Mazar-e-Sharif. On 19 October, a British vehicle patrol was attacked. A Lance-Corporal Steven Sherwood was shot in the chest and killed, the first British soldier to die in combat on Operation Herrick. As well as the usual litany of complaints, chief of which was that no lessons from the previous deployments were being addressed in any meaningful way, the commanding officer, a Lieutenant Colonel Brown, made the prescient observation that it was only with the development of a competent and credible Afghan army and police force that the international forces would be able to withdraw from Afghanistan. This obvious insight seemed to get entirely lost within the grandiose plans being hatched in Kabul for ISAF's expansion. A last chance to re-evaluate the mission in Afghanistan passed unnoticed.

In February 2005, NATO announced that ISAF would be further expanded into the west of Afghanistan. This process, Stage 2 of the ISAF expansion, began on 31 May 2005, when ISAF took command of two Italian-led PRTs in the provinces of Herat and Farah as well as a FOB in Herat, also provided by Italy. Later that year two further ISAF-led PRTs in the west became operational, in Chagcharan, led by Lithuania, and Qala-e Naw, led by Spain.

After the original establishment of the ISAF mission in Kabul in 2001, led by a British HQ and supported by an infantry battalion, the British government had been assiduous in reducing its commitment to Afghanistan. The next three years had witnessed 'military

tokenism', a pattern repeated by all the contributing ISAF nations. In the summer of 2004, at the Istanbul NATO conference, the government had announced it would deploy the headquarters of the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) to Kabul to command the NATO Stage 3 expansion into a new Regional Command South. The culmination of this process would be the Stage 4 expansion into Regional Command East, at which point ISAF would assume responsibility for all Afghanistan. Shortly before the Istanbul announcement, Lieutenant General David Richards was informed that he would command the ISAF mission.[138] His posting would start in January 2005. At the time, there was a hopelessly unrealistic expectation that Stage 3 would start in September 2005. In fact, the handover of southern and eastern Afghanistan from US forces did not begin before the spring of 2006 and would be completed in the late autumn. So, by the end of 2004, as the British handed over their PRTs to Nordic contingents and were re-deploying to Kabul, it was known that an increased British commitment would be required to support the planned ISAF expansion. This commitment would almost certainly involve sending at least a reinforced battalion to south-west Afghanistan.

Shortly after the announcement of Stage 2 expansion the Blair government took the firm decision to re-deploy the British mission in ISAF to southern Afghanistan, as part of ISAF's Stage 3 expansion. Specifically, the decision to deploy to Helmand appears to have been taken in March or April 2005, or some nine months after the Istanbul announcement.[139] According to John Reid's subsequent testimony, his predecessor Geoff Hoon signalled British intent to redeploy south at a NATO conference in Nice on 10 February 2005. In April, with Reid about to assume the post of defence secretary, the service chiefs agreed the deployment south starting in September (a quite impossible deadline given ISAF's foot-dragging). Two months then passed between the first statement of British intent under one defence secretary and Helmand becoming fixed in British sights under his successor.[140] By the time the first British reconnaissance teams were despatched in May 2005 to visit PRTs established in Uruzgan, Kandahar and Helmand provinces, the British commitment to Afghanistan had been reduced to the single Gurkha company conducting patrols in Feyzebad province in north-eastern Afghanistan, as well as the security battalion in Kabul manned by the Royal Gloucestershire Berkshire and Wiltshire Light Infantry. This unit would briefly send a company to Helmand, the first to serve in the province (and the first to serve under the Op Herrick 4 banner).

It was to prove a momentous decision but the path that led to this decision was unclear. Lieutenant General David Richards, who would command ISAF the following year,

confessed to not knowing how the British task force ended up being committed to the little-known province of Helmand.[141] Neither could Reid shed light on the decision as it was taken before he assumed his appointment as defence secretary. Everyone agreed, in General Richards's words, that the ISAF mission needed 'gingering up'.[142] But this commitment had less to do with military hubris and more to do with the political toxicity of the Iraq War. By now, the Blair government was looking for a way out, while not wishing to be viewed as a weak ally by Washington. The ISAF Stage 3/4 expansions offered such an opportunity. The British would take over the ISAF show and shift their commitment to this less toxic war. It was a 'good war', from a political perspective. From a military perspective, assuming the lead nation role naturally implied that Britain would have to do more than indulge in the 'military tokenism' of the last three years. Merely redeploying a single infantry battalion to the south would have been inappropriate. Task Force Helmand would have to be a more substantial force, in line with Britain's status as ISAF lead nation. The unanswered question at the time was: how much more substantial?

On 7 July 2005, John Reid, newly appointed to take over from the embattled Geoff Hoon, made the simple announcement that Britain would also be establishing a PRT in Helmand Province (in fact, taking over the American-built PRT). This announcement followed the May reconnaissance. Reid only officially confirmed the mission in a statement on 26 January 2006, six months later.

In fact, three goldilocks options were worked up, but it was always the case that the third option (the largest force package) would eventually be chosen. Despite later criticisms from the task force commander, Brigadier Ed Butler, that the mission was wilfully and culpably under-resourced, he received the maximum package, within Treasury-imposed constraints. There was no casualness or optimism on the part of the planning staffs at the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ), and nor were the concerns of the deploying formation 16 Air Assault Brigade ignored. The planners involved were working within tight financial caps. Dispatching soldiers on the cheap, to faraway lands, is practically a British Treasury tradition. Butler was unfortunately joining a long list of unlucky commanders from the past.

Three factors ultimately determined this maximum force package. First, there was political necessity – Britain had to be seen to be offering more as lead nation. The second factor was Defence Secretary John Reid's cautious nature. Following events in Iraq, there was an understandable desire not to get caught out. The larger force was an insurance policy. A third factor was Richards, but his reasoning was different. Like Butler, Richards

was unimpressed by the levels of commitment and preparations for the deployment of his force - the ARRC – and he had arguments both with superiors in MOD and NATO. Eventually, he impressed on Reid in a secret meeting that a strong British force should be deployed to south west Afghanistan.[143] This took place in Berlin in mid-September 2005, coincident with Reid attending a NATO conference. Richards went behind the backs of the CDS and Director of Operations, Major General Robert Fry to hold this meeting, despite the fact that the former, General Mike Walker, had reassured him that he would be appropriately supported. According to Richard's account, it was at this meeting that Reid promised Richards the additional resources he was demanding.

By this stage, Richards was diverging from fellow senior officers in MOD. The principal reason for this difference in perceptions was that the latter could see no compelling reasons for a strong force. It is important to recognise that Helmand was peaceful at the time. Major General Peter Wall, the Deputy Chief of Joint Operations, thought there was a 'relatively quiescent population', which was true. Just three American soldiers had been killed in Helmand in five years. Four police chiefs had been assassinated, but this was hardly unusual.[144] British advance parties despatched in May 2005 to visit PRTs established in Uruzgan, Kandahar and Helmand Provinces had driven about openly in Land Rover Snatches, vehicles that would later become notorious because of their vulnerability to roadside bombs, without meeting any hostility. There were discussions over how many civilian minivans the British task force would require to ferry staff, a remarkable measure of the MOD perception that the mission would be essentially peaceful. Nobody had challenged still less attacked the small reconnaissance force. One of the officers who took part in this reconnaissance later returned as a brigade commander and was quoted as having reported there was a fight waiting to happen in Helmand.[145] This seems an observation taken out of context and re-warmed for posterity by critics of the mission. There were no Cassandras at the time because there were no reasons for doom-laden prophetic utterances. General Mike Jackson would later make the point succinctly:

'No intelligence was put in front of the Ministry of Defence which said, "What you're about to do will result in mayhem." Had that been so, I think there would have then been a very serious discussion as to whether that plan was viable or not.'[146]

There may not have been Cassandras warning of mayhem, but there were voices warning of a potentially difficult mission. Foreign Minister Kim Howells later testified how he raised questions, but only succeeded in provoking the usual departmental tizzies.

Over 2005, DfID hosted cross-government seminars on Helmand that were 'pretty gloomy' over what was judged 'a fragile, traumatised, fractured province'.[147] Ed Butler recalled: '…both the preliminary operations teams, the special forces teams, who had been out in theatre, the individuals who pulled together the joint UK campaign plan for Helmand, all came up with the same sort of recommendations. They said that we were underestimating how long it was going to take; we did not have sufficient resources or know what was the actual mission going to be [sic]. All these points were very clearly made by December 2005…I asked and I certainly never got those questions answered.'[148] He later wrote there were significant mismatches in the government's strategy, obvious to all who were examining the problem in detail, but nobody seemed to find the moral courage, or display the necessary leadership to address the concerns being raised.[149] In the airless corridors of Whitehall, everybody and nobody was responsible. At the time, the Chief of Joint Operations at PJHQ was Air Marshal Glenn Torpy. He was reporting to General Mike Walker, the CDS, soon to retire. In MOD Main Building, Major General Rob Fry still held the reins as Director of Operations. This triumvirate must have been aware of the dissonant noises, but it appears the unstoppable momentum of the impending operation could not be realistically slowed or the mission re-evaluated.

It was later suggested the MOD had recommended Helmand province as the first British choice on the grounds that it fitted with Britain's role as lead nation in counter-narcotics. The Prime Minister merely gave his assent. It appears that as early as the summer of 2004, at least the possibility of a British deployment to Helmand had been raised.[150] Another version suggested that the decision came from Downing Street, possibly encouraged by the FCO. Later evidence given to the Defence Select Committee indicates the MOD produced a paper entitled 'Why Helmand?' in the first half of 2005.[151] This was submitted to the Chiefs of Staff Committee and was subsequently endorsed by the Prime Minister's office. Apparently, this paper has now been lost (to the possible relief of its authors who thus escape the judgement of history).

Whatever justifications were made in the 'Why Helmand?' paper, the more prosaic explanation is that the Canadians pushed to assume control of Kandahar which left the British with little option but to pick up the left-over Helmand province. In General Robert Fry's view, the Canadians sought some sort of 'redemption' for their armed forces by volunteering to deploy to Kandahar, although it would turn into their Calvary.[152] In fact, the Canadians were asked to deploy to Kandahar in 2002, and indeed despatched a small contingent to support Operation Enduring Freedom. From the Canadian perspective,

Kandahar ‘belonged to them’ because they had the longest continuous presence in the province along with US forces. Over 2003-2004, a series of bilateral negotiations took place between Britain and Canada which appeared to close the decision. In December 2003 the Canadian government announced that it would establish a PRT, but left open the question of where. The following spring, Britain and the Netherlands joined the Canadian camp, knowing the deployment would probably be in the south, but again left questions of detail unanswered. By the summer, Ottawa received confirmation from London that the deployment would be in the south. In the autumn, the UK High Commissioner discussed partnering with the Canadians in Kandahar. In October, the British Brigadier Barney White-Spunner visited the south. More discussions eventually led to a Canadian decision, made on 9 December 2004, that a PRT would be established in Kandahar. As a consequence, in February 2005, the Royal Marine Colonel Gordon Messenger was sent to Kandahar to assess British options, later followed by Air Commodore Mark Leakey. By this stage, there really was only one option: Helmand.[153] The Canadian decision to deploy to Kandahar received prime ministerial approval on 21 March 2005 and the public announcement was made in May.

Certainly, there were ambiguities over accountability in decision-making, exacerbated by the change-over of key personnel. At PJHQ, Torpy was replaced by Major General Nick Houghton. Crucially, Houghton, who was serving as a senior British representative in Iraq, left his job in mid-March 2006, ‘span round’, and found himself in command of operations in Afghanistan, as the Chief of Joint Operations, at the beginning of April.[154] He had some background knowledge of Operation Herrick, but appointing a new general in this key post, at such a crucial stage of an operation, was injudicious at best. With PJHQ transfixed by an imminent major British operation in Basra (Operation Sinbad), Houghton stood little chance of getting to grips with his brief just when it mattered most. This command change was compounded by a change at the very top of the military hierarchy with Stirrup assuming the post of CDS on 28 April (the day before 3 Para conducted its first patrol in Helmand).

It was also the case that the arithmetic of the deployment was suspect. It appears that Major General Fry, a highly intelligent officer, may have been the owner of the broken abacus. Tasked with scoping the Afghanistan commitment over 2004, under the auspices of a strategic planning group, it appears that Fry and his team became the originators of the good war-bad war dichotomy.[155] Specifically, Fry made the graphic linkage between troops drawing down from Iraq, and troops ramping up in Afghanistan. This later

infamous Powerpoint slide illustrated not so much hubris as an unfortunate arithmetic based on the most optimistic assumptions. *Even with* the drawdown from Iraq, the down-sizing British Army would struggle to meet its Afghanistan commitments. Hoon had been warning about 'overstretch' since the beginning of operations in Afghanistan, *before* the Labour government's defence cuts (under *Future Army Structures*). It was as if the inconvenience of arithmetic that simply did not stack up could not be allowed to act as an impediment to military commitments, spawned by Blair's interventionist and ambitious foreign policy. When General Richard Dannatt subsequently took over as CGS he straightaway questioned the arithmetic and got into trouble over making remarks that the army was 'running hot'.

The MOD planning team was following political direction but it was perhaps not entirely blameless. The projection offered in the PowerPoint was only realistic if the Basra task force did indeed withdraw, and if a future commitment in Afghanistan remained stable. But what if neither of these assumptions held? In the event, total withdrawal from Basra was five years away, and the Afghanistan mission would be anything but stable. Were these possibilities discussed? Did anyone raise the uncomfortable 'what ifs'?

There is also a secondary point over the so-called 'bad war' in Iraq. This it was *politically*, but not acutely in the eyes of the military. In 2004, the British Army in Basra did not consider that it was failing, although there was a growing disenchantment with the operation. Senior officers, including Fry, would naturally have been aware that political masters were seeking a way out; he would have also known that British soldiers did not care for the place; and Afghanistan offered a legitimate escape route. The British Army did seek to re-balance to Afghanistan, but it is a quite different thing to suggest that it did so deliberately and manipulatively to replace a 'bad war' with a 'good war', or to save itself from future cuts.

A final point that may be made on the Basra 'bad war' is that not a few of the Iraq-based senior officers got into something of a huff over the fact that their war was so labelled. Some made strong comments that have since been quoted many times in various books and articles. This has added to the conspiracy theories. The fact is that both were bad American wars, and falling in love with the mission is not wise.

The counter-cases to conspiracy theories alleging army machinations are too strong. It was always known from the spring of 2003 that there would have to be a renewed British commitment in Afghanistan to support the proposed ISAF expansion. The scale and scope of the commitment remained uncertain (as it did for all the NATO countries that signed up

to the deal) but it was there, and it had nothing to do with a military conspiracy. The argument that the British Army deliberately sought engagement in Afghanistan to make amends for Iraq was also weak. The sense that the British mission was failing in Basra did not grow until *after* the decisions on Operation Herrick had already been taken. In the summer of 2005, just five British soldiers had been killed in the previous three months in Basra, and the Basra Palace base had not been mortared for last seven months.[156] The British brigade in Iraq did not feel beaten. Operation Telic began to seriously unravel – coincidentally – in the summer of 2006, which may have contributed to the popular hypothesis that somehow there was a linkage between one unappealing war spiralling out of control, and the British Army's apparent enthusiasm for getting stuck into another 'better war'. A general reportedly expressing this view to *Daily Telegraph* editor and historian Max Hastings may have reinforced this theory. British lack of enthusiasm for operations in Basra did develop, but over a period and it was not a universally shared view. When 20 Armoured Brigade deployed to Basra that summer (2006), it did not wave white flags. It put the boot in. Defeatism was not in the air. The view that the British should take a lead in Afghanistan was a separate decision, and was not 'dishonourable', as Reid put it, but rather stemmed from a belief that the British genuinely had something to offer. In this respect, there is a case that the British were rather the victims of their own self-duping propaganda over how well they were performing in Iraq. Later, a sense that Afghanistan might redeem Iraq did emerge but this followed the decision to deploy the British task force.

A subsequent allegation made by the British Ambassador, Sherard Cowper-Coles that the British Army sought to reinforce the operation in Helmand to save itself from further cuts also appears unfounded.[157] General Richard Dannatt may or may not have made the remark to Cowper-Coles in the summer of 2007 that the army had to 'use them or lose them' (referring to the battlegroups being withdrawn from Iraq) but this was not the reason why more troops were requested for Helmand (Cowper-Coles has reportedly since apologized for making this allegation). The planned down-sizing of the army was already underway. There were no plans to down-size further, and nor was a commitment to Afghanistan in any way an influence on the future re-structuring of the army. All these matters had already been deliberated during the first Blair government. The reason why the operation in Helmand was reinforced was because the argument was quickly made that the first task force had been hopelessly under-resourced, most notably by Butler, who before the task force even deployed repeatedly warned of the under-resourcing and lack of commitment.

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Butler was right to highlight that his brigade was being despatched to Helmand ‘on the cheap’. But this only mattered if you set yourself the impossible task of securing Helmand. Nobody gave Butler this mission. He was, in fairness, specified a totally inadequate list of wishful good intentions which amounted to a parody of a mission (delivering good governance, security and development), but it was his responsibility to cut his cloth accordingly. The Dutch to the north did not attempt to ‘secure’ the entire province of Uruzgan. They appreciated this was an impossible task, given their resources, and focused their efforts exclusively on the districts surrounding the capital Tarin Kowt. The Italian-Spanish contingent in neighbouring Herat followed a similarly modest policy. Why the British felt they could not make the same choices is the more important question over-hanging the deployment. The later argument made that ‘no plan survives contact with the enemy’ is weak (Von Molkte did not actually say these words, he was making a point about the certainty of one’s plan, but has been misquoted ever since). They do. Otherwise there would be little point making plans. Bad plans don’t and nor do plans that are basically discarded. The latter happened, and *not* because of contact with the enemy. Task Force Helmand abandoned ‘the plan’ within a few weeks of arriving in theatre *before* it became entangled in the ‘platoon house’ sieges. Indeed, it abandoned the plan before it had even fired any shots, or encountered ‘the enemy’.

What was clear was that as a result of this somewhat confused and opaque decision-making the MOD would send a task force to Helmand either in late 2005, or early 2006. In Brigadier Andrew McKay’s later condemnation this was done with ‘eyes shut and their fingers crossed’.[158] In the words of another serving officer ‘there was institutional denial and ignorance’.[159] Voices that suggested caution were drowned out by a lobby that argued for ‘cracking on’, despite the lack of intelligence and resources. This view of a precipitate British entry into Helmand became part of the myth of Operation Herrick 4 but it is not supported by the facts. What was striking about the decision was the extreme caution demonstrated by John Reid who eventually delayed the mission by four months, weathering significant criticism for doing so. The better description of the British entry into Helmand was given by Matthew Parris in the *Times*, many years later as the task force withdrew:

‘Thus, not quite by accident yet never really by design, people who should have known better, people who couldn’t have known better, and people who simply wouldn’t focus inched each other towards a steepening downward slope. Of course nobody could

have known that the Helmand operation must fail; but many should have known that it was a huge and imponderable risk.'[160]

John Reid's announcement that a British task force would be deployed to Helmand province in the spring of 2006 was the key decision of his short tenure as defence secretary. Geoff Hoon had inherited armed forces committed to peace-keeping in the Balkans and looking forward to ending their long overdue stay in Northern Ireland. A gentle decline was on the horizon. By the time he handed over to John Reid, Britain had gone to war in Iraq and was now trapped by its consequences. The world had been turned on its head and the old certainties had been wiped away. Seeing this was proving hard work. There was still a sense in the MOD that the events of the last two years had been a blip and that 'business as usual' would be restored. For the government this became a matter of absolute urgency as the political liability of Iraq tore the Labour Party apart and ended the career of its most successful premier in the modern era.

John Reid first visited Afghanistan at the beginning of October 2005, four months after assuming the post of defence secretary. His visit was confined to Kabul and he did not venture to Helmand to see for himself where the government was proposing to deploy the British task force. In Kabul he attended the re-opening of the city's second-oldest school - the Abdul Ghafor High School – where he cut ribbons and accepted flowers from girls dressed in colourful tribal costumes. The real purpose of his visit was to finalise the arrangements for the Stage 3 and Stage 4 expansions of the NATO mission which would see ISAF take over responsibility for all Afghanistan from US Joint Task Forces. A three day conference was held, attended by all the contributing NATO countries. The conference was also attended by General Abdul Rahim Wardak, the Afghan Minister of Defence, Jaap de Hoof Scheffer, the NATO Secretary General, and by SACEUR, General James Jones. After the foot-dragging manner in which some nations had approached Stages 1 and 2, the American delegation was keen to inject firmer commitment and a sense of urgency into the European partners. In the end, despite the messy arrangements, the timetable would be largely met, albeit with the four month delay. For the US Army unit languishing in forgotten Helmand the moment could not come too soon.

The last piece of the diplomatic framework, before the deployment of the British task force to Helmand, was laid by 'The Afghanistan Compact', a conference held in London in January 2006 attended by sixty countries. The conference was sub-titled with the optimistic slogan 'Building on Success'. The sense that the fragile, impoverished and corrupted state of Afghanistan might actually be slipping into war was passed over. In line

with DfID's mandate, 'The Afghanistan Compact' was about Afghanistan fulfilling its millennium goals. This conference would be Tony Blair's swansong on Afghanistan before retiring bruised from the fiasco of Iraq. Even this latter war had in the end failed to quench his appetite for Third World interventionism. The unrealism of 'The Afghanistan Compact' could be gauged by the sorts of articles that the *ISAF Mirror* in Kabul was printing at the turn of the year: warm stories about French nurses visiting a village outside Kabul, or of ISAF helicopters delivering blankets to a village in northern Afghanistan following a land slide, or Spanish soldiers ferrying a burns victim to a hospital. No mention of the war - the great taboo subject in NATO.

For the Afghans, led by President Karzai, the important point was the money. A total of $10.5 billion was pledged. But as critics pointed out, these headline figures were deeply misleading. Money pledged did not mean money obligated still less money spent. A proportion of the pledged money came from funds that had already been pledged at the Bonn, Tokyo and Berlin conferences – a fraudulent accounting trick routinely played by donor countries. These were not additional funds at all. Trying to unravel the opaque spending mechanisms and accounting procedures of sixty odd countries was an impossible task. Some of the money – nobody could say how much with any certainty – was frittered away on pointless initiatives, like equal opportunity and diversity courses run by the British Embassy, a risible imposition of Western values on a backward and conservative society. A large slice was wasted on flawed policies, like the counter-narcotics plan (or lack of plan), also funded by the British, that witnessed the squandering of between £20-70 million – it was very difficult to determine how much from the government's own figures - with no results.[161] And much of the money was simply embezzled by Afghan officials. No matter how much blood was pumped into the patient it was only succeeding in keeping the patient alive because blood was still leaking from untreated wounds. What the Afghanistan reconstruction plan was achieving, mainly, was holding up a mirror to the intractably complex world of foreign aid – a world of worthy intentions and deep, pocket-lining cynicism in equal measure, of life-saving aid, but also of colossal mismanagement, waste and corruption. This was the Kabul colourfully described in Jason Burke's seminal *9/11 Wars*: on any street you could equally meet a saint or a crook.

For Western donors like Britain, 'The Afghanistan Compact' was about setting targets, another staple of the Blair governments. These rolled out like manifesto pledges: minefields to be reduced by 70 per cent; primary school enrolment to be increased by 75 per cent; hunger to be reduced by 5 per cent annually (although quite how anyone was

proposing to measure the hungriness of the Afghan population was not clear); electricity in rural areas to be increased by 25 per cent, and so it went on, a litany of promises that could massaged by statistical manipulation by the time the next international conference came around to demonstrate that progress had in fact been achieved. Security was not ignored and within this raft of proposals it was agreed the Afghan security forces would be increased to about 70,000 by 2010. It was a measure of how far 'The Afghanistan Compact' was from the reality of Afghanistan that by 2010, four times this number of Afghan security forces was being demanded to fight the expanding Taliban insurgency.

At the heart of ISAF's expansion strategy were the PRTs or Provincial Reconstruction Teams. To Barbara Stapleton, the political advisor to the European Union Special Representative, this strategy proved unbalanced and flawed.[162] The PRTs followed national agendas and failed to cooperate and coordinate between themselves. There were tensions between the military and the civil agencies. The civil agencies themselves bickered. PRTs began to mirror the fractured state of Afghanistan by ignoring instructions from the centre if they judged them irrelevant. Some PRTs – like the British PRT in Mazar-e Sharif – were given such meaninglessly small amounts of reconstruction money that it is doubtful whether they achieved any tangible impact in their provinces. Attempts to align PRT operations – through conferences, steering groups, executive committees – all failed. Instead, the aid effort became 'Balkanised' with governments that had contributed to ISAF more concerned with demonstrating spurious success to their electorates than with achieving real success. The voice piece of this shambles was the *ISAF Mirror*, which, it was joked, was used by local Afghans as wrapping paper. Page after page offered examples of ISAF progress as the country slid deeper into insurgency. The PRTs experienced, as Stapleton put it 'the paradox of development', namely, that what you expect to happen is confounded by what actually happens as a result of your good intentions. There was no rigorous auditing mechanism for the activities of the PRTs. There was too much focus on inputs (the headline targets beloved of politicians), and unflattering outputs were skipped over. Instead of the imagined virtuous circle, a vicious spiral set in.

Many of the problems faced by the PRTs were based in Afghanistan's history and culture. Afghanistan had a very thin history of central governance from Kabul. Abdur Rahman, 'the Iron Emir', was the only Afghan leader in modern history who had managed to subdue and control the fissiparous ethnic groups, forging a unified state at the end of the 19th century. Since then the country had experienced failed experiments in constitutional monarchies, democracy, Marxism, warlordism, and radical Islamism. These had created

centrifugal forces, throwing governance back into the hands of tribes, often at the point of a gun. The arrival of international forces and the overthrow of the Taliban had raised great expectations, in part exacerbated by a refugee population that had experienced a better standard of living in Pakistan and Iran. These expectations had not been met. The reconstruction effort had been slow, patchy, localised and sometimes wasteful. Cronyism and corruption had flourished. Two years were wasted as the Americans fruitlessly pursued an aggressive counter-terrorist operation in Afghanistan while keeping the Europeans constrained in Kabul. In the absence of any real governance the opium trade boomed and retired warlords dusted off their AK-47s resuming their old practices. By then, of course, American attention had been diverted to Iraq. Into this mix, the oversold concept of PRTs was thrown. This inevitably brought the PRTs into conflict with the NGOs and presaged the dysfunctional relation between DfID and the British Army that would plague British reconstruction efforts in Helmand.

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For the NGOs, ISAF were a bunch of arrivistes who did not understand the nuances of aid and reconstruction. For the military, the NGOs were dogmatic do-gooders who were failing to take a more pragmatic approach to the situation in Afghanistan. The number of NGOs operating in Afghanistan, drawn like bees to the honey-pot of reconstruction money, was staggering – over 2,500 were registered with the Afghan Interim Authority.[163] The overwhelming majority of these were the appropriately named one-man ‘suitcase NGOs’ – or Afghans more than happy to fill their suitcases with free Western money. This shadowy world of aid was a deeply sensitive if not taboo subject. Only a few intrepid reporters like Linda Polman in her investigative book *War Games: The Study of Aid and War in Modern Times* dared tackle the subject.[164] Polman found what many suspected: ‘Western do-goodery commonly worsened already dire situations by provoking rampant corruption. Polman coined her own phrase for ‘suitcase NGOs’. She dubbed them MONGOS, ‘My Own NGO’, or people getting rich by dispensing ‘consultancy’ in Third World countries. Foreign correspondent Jonathan Foreman also tackled the subject in *Aiding and Abetting*, a book arguing that a great deal of British government aid channelled through organisations like DfID was simply being stolen or squandered. Foreman had some credibility as he had worked in Iraq and Afghanistan and had witnessed at first hand the waste. These intelligent books made no difference because DfID was a protected department, immune from forensic inquiry that would no doubt have left ordinary Britons aghast at what was actually happening to their taxes siphoned off to Third World

countries.

Neither ISAF nor the aid organisations ever really saw eye to eye with organisations like *Médecins sans Frontières* taking a high-minded approach and refusing to take part in any meetings with military forces. This Western ideological squabbling was paid for by ordinary Afghans who did not see the expected development take off. The PRTs quickly became known as 'ISAF on the cheap' for that is exactly how they came across to many observers in Afghanistan. The promises had proved empty – NATO and other donor countries that had initially rushed to help rebuild Afghanistan then balked at the size of the problem (and real cost) and were now engaged in face-saving minimal efforts. Nobody wanted to be seen to pull out, but nobody, least of all the Americans, was really that interested in ramping up the operation. The PRTs consequently meandered in many often conflicting directions.

Out of this increasingly chaotic situation emerged the 'Provincial Stabilisation Strategy' which ran for a year without visible results, before giving way to another initiative, 'The Regional Development Zones' or RDZs. These also proved fruitless and were replaced by the 'Afghan Development Zones' or ADZs, as if Afghanistan could be won over by rolling out acronyms. It was an ADZ centred on Lashkar Gah and Gereshk that would be the centrepiece of Britain's 'Helmand Plan', the scheme that would inform the deployment of the Helmand Task Force. The ADZs would be part of an 'ink spot strategy', the idea being that the military would clear an area of insurgents to allow reconstruction to take place. As Stapleton shrewdly noted, in Afghanistan, the plan commonly substituted for the action. As reform processes came up against the political constraints that often rendered them ineffectual the tendency was to start another process and abandon the former one.[165]

By now, another problem had beset the PRTs. In Afghan eyes, they were deeply compromised. American special force units started operating from them (or Afghans believed they did), causing mayhem in their search for 'terrorists'. Afghans were detained in PRTs. The PRTs dealt with corrupt officials and unintentionally strengthened their positions. On occasions, tribal leaders simply refused to have anything to do with PRT initiatives. As importantly, many simply did not understand the purpose of the PRTs – the communication of ISAF's intentions was abysmal. Stapleton concluded her analysis with a metaphor. The international community was dealing haphazardly with symptoms, while dodging causes. Far from sailing towards a better future, Afghanistan was heading for an iceberg, and Western squabbling was akin to re-arranging deckchairs on the Titanic.[166] It

was on this sinking ship that the Blair government embarked Task Force Helmand.

CHAPTER 3
A PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT OPERATION
Operation HERRICK
4 March-October 2006

General Mike Jackson, the Chief of the General Staff, could have been forgiven for describing Britain's latest theatre of operations as 'miles of fuck all and a river'.[167] Helmand, the province where the British Army was about to deploy a reinforced parachute battlegroup, was mostly uncharted territory. In the 19th century it was known as Hilmand, a spelling which had persisted in some gazetteers. The boast of a local hothead that the British had been beaten in the past and would be beaten again was not quite accurate. The British had never really paid great attention to Helmand, except for a brief period during the first Anglo-Afghan War. The only town of note, Girishk – the modern-day Gereshk – had been briefly invested and a fort had been built. It was still serving as a prison when the British returned at the beginning of the 21st century. A second fort was built in central Helmand in the 1880s, in Nad-e Ali, which the British would take over and turn into a forward operating base.

Gereshk was a town where history seemed to repeat itself. In the 19th century, the town bequeathed Afghanistan its first Barakzai monarch, Dost Mohammed Khan. He was supplanted by the British in 1837 and replaced by a Popalzai, a folly repeated by the British who unwisely removed Helmand's governor in 2005. The Barakzai had provided many of the nation's civil servants and bureaucrats. Rather than waste these talents, the British used the tribe as tax collectors over the neighbouring Alizai. This led to an Alizai uprising which the British were forced to suppress (hence the forts). Barakzai-Alizai tensions were still alive in Gereshk when the British returned in the 21st century. Unfortunately, this tribal fault-line would be ignorantly re-awakened in a facsimile of the first Anglo-Afghan War.

In 1880, during the second Anglo-Afghan War, the British and Afghans had clashed at

Maiwand, in neighbouring Kandahar province, an event that was still remembered by Pashtun tribesmen of south-west Afghanistan. It is true the Afghan general, Ayub Khan, had crossed Helmand from Herat, but there had been no Helmand-based insurrection against the British. The war had simply passed by the province. On the advice of his supposed Afghan ally, the Wali of Kandahar, Brigadier General Burrows, the British commander, had advanced as far as Gereshk on the Helmand River to block Ayub Khan. But he went no further. Instead he withdrew back towards Kandahar after the Wali's troops deserted him, a tale of fickleness and broken promises which would have sounded familiar to a modern-day British soldier.

Nor was it much of a war. Victorian myth-makers were sufficiently roused to erect a thirty foot stone 'Lion of Maiwand' in Forbury Gardens, in Reading, to commemorate the glorious last stand of the 66th Foot, the Royal Berkshire Regiment. Afghan nationalism would only finally catch up in this competition of false commemoration in 1950 with the erection of Maiwand Monument, in Kabul Square. With a streak of Victorian racism, the British monument recorded the names of the 'white' soldiers that perished, but not the names of the 'brown' or Indian soldiers. What these monuments commemorated was a pointless duel on a dusty plain, which had no conceivable strategic interest to the British. In this sense the battle presaged the hundreds of petty gun battles which the modern successors of the Anglo-Afghan wars would find themselves drawn to fight in the Helmand river valley.

Maiwand exposed the deep cultural misunderstanding that seemed to colour Anglo-Afghan relations from the beginning. Immediately after the battle, Khan wrote a letter to Lord Roberts protesting that 'I have at all times regarded the English Government with friendship and still continue so to regard it'.[168] His argument was with Sher Ali Khan, not the British. When he learned that a British force was at Kushk-i Kakhud he deliberately detoured to avoid Burrows. It was Burrows who sought him out, and as Khan lamented 'what was pre-ordained came to pass' – his superior force won. To Khan, Maiwand had been a terrible and avoidable mistake. He wrote, 'On no account will I relinquish the friendship of the English Government…I now write to you in this friendly way that you may write and tell me in a friendly way what you think is the best course for me to pursue, and these affairs may be settled in an amicable manner.' In as many words, Khan was politely telling Lord Roberts that his subordinate commander had unnecessarily intervened in an internal Afghan dispute, with unfortunate consequences – much as would happen in the summer of 2006 in Helmand. Roberts, naturally, would have none of this. A British

force had been humiliated and revenge was in order.

The other unsatisfactory aspect of the battle is why the British saw threat where no real threat existed. Over the span of a century and across three Anglo-Afghan wars, there would never be a credible threat to the integrity of the British Raj. It was always in the imagination and sometimes in the fabrications of over-broiled officials who saw a sort of Pathan barbarism, prodded by Russian machinations, waiting to skulk through the backdoor of the British Empire. The answer to these imagined fears was 'Forward Policy', the Victorian equivalent of America's policy of the right to pre-emptive strike, and Blair's proclivity for foreign interventions. You did not wait for trouble to arrive at your door. You marched off into the distance and threatened trouble yourself. As long as you owned the Maxims, or even Nordenfeldts that fired '777 shots in 2 minutes at a range of 1,200 yards' as Roberts noted with some satisfaction, it seemed to pay off, with the occasional necessary disaster to cool off the warmongers.[169]

The chasing down of belligerent Waziri tribal chiefs in the 1920s had all the futility of the hunt for Taliban commanders in the 2000s. The first did not threaten India and the second could not point to Britain on a world atlas, let alone threaten the security of Britain. The British were wasting their time in Afghanistan, but each time it took a setback, escalating costs, and an increasingly sceptical home government to end the misadventure and order the withdrawal back to India. Throughout, more sensible minds found themselves having to rein in those fascinated by the Great Game. In 1885, Lord Salisbury complained to Roberts, '… we are still the victims of an incurable attack of 'brag'. We cannot reconcile ourselves to the truth that if we will not provide cloth enough for the coat we want, we must cut down our coat to the cloth we have got. So many of our amateur, semi-military programmes go on the assumption that we had [a] large army…'[170] Surely, Lord Salisbury's ghost hung over every Blair war cabinet.

Intermittent frontier wars then became another leitmotif on the imperial canvas. Both sides seemed to derive some enjoyment from the spats and there was mutual respect. When General Lockhart prepared to leave India in 1898, after the bloody Tirah Campaign, hundreds of his former Afridi enemies cheered him to the station and volunteered to pull his carriage. The campaign had left several hundred dead on both sides but rather than provide a cause for further enmity, the war encouraged Afridis to join the British Army. A good game had been played and honour was satisfied. The last war that Britain fought in the lawless border areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan ran from 1936 until Partition. The chief opponent in this coda to the great game was Mirza Ali Khan, a fanatic from North

Waziristan. The deployment of 40,000 troops and an indiscriminate and punitive aerial bombing campaign - always a favourite with the Indian Army trying to control recalcitrant tribes - failed to dampen Ali Khan's enthusiasm for a fight. 'Bomber' Harris earned much valuable experience bombing Kandahar as a young pilot officer, an experience which he would multiply one hundred fold against Nazi Germany. The British, still in their imperial guise, retained a sense of sport over the whole matter. When Khan died he received a generous obituary in *The Times* describing him as a 'doughty and honourable opponent'.[171] It was doubtful, in the modern game, that Mullah Omar, the tricky opponent now facing the British at the crease, would receive a similar applause from the pavilion.[172]

Had Burrows crossed the Helmand River he would have found a province not greatly changed from the one British paratroopers entered one hundred and twenty years later. A major who deployed to the town of Sangin in 2006 remarked on arrival:

'Imagine England, then remove all the roads, the power supply, the communications, all the structure of government, and there's no money but there's corruption and drugs.'[173]

This was perhaps the first thing that impressed military planners – the sheer scale of the place and the near-total lack of anything resembling a modern infrastructure. How would the modern soldiers cope against 'the united horrors of climate, treachery and barbarous warfare', in the words of the memorial plaque to the 44th Regiment wiped out at Gandamak?[174]

Helmand Province stretches for 300 kilometres, from the Pakistan border in the south, to the district of Baghran in the north, which pokes into the side of neighbouring Uruzgan Province. The southern border, ill-defined by the Durand Line, runs for 160 kilometres across the line of the low-lying Chaghai Hills. It is open, barely policed and criss-crossed by dozens of ancient smuggling routes. Post-imperial breast-beaters would always portray the Durand Line as another example of the British insensitively drawing lines across tribal lands. In fact, the border was agreed at the insistence of Afghanistan's ruler, Amir Abdur Rahman, who also insisted the Royal Engineer officer, Mortimer Durand, undertake the work.[175] When the agreement was finally signed, Amir Abdur Rahman was profuse in his praise of Mortimer's work. Far from being an example of imperial arrogance, contemporaries viewed the new border as an example of British 'fairness'. In the far north, Helmand becomes mountainous narrowing into a fifty kilometre wide salient. Neither the southern border, nor the northern valleys had ever been successfully controlled by the provincial governments. The internal borders are equally lawless. Helmand shares them

with six other provinces: Nimroz, Farah, Ghor, Daikondi, Uruzgan, and Kandahar. Within those borders, the province is divided into thirteen administrative districts, the most prosperous being Lashkar Gah (meaning ‘Place of the Soldiers’), the seat of the provincial capital, and Nahr-e Saraj, where Gereshk, the commercial capital is located. The only other settlements of any significance are Sangin, a town with a population of about 20,000 at the heart of the opium trade; Musa Qaleh, a smaller settlement in northern Helmand; Now Zad, in the far north west; and Garmsir in the south. The province itself was only created in 1941.

The defining feature of Helmand is the river that goes by the same name, the longest in Afghanistan.[176] The classical world knew it as the Erymandrus and without it Helmand would be like neighbouring Nimroz, a mostly uninhabited desert. Archaeological evidence shows that human civilizations had been exploiting the life-giving river since at least 3,000 B.C. As the only perennial river between the Indus to the east and the Tigris-Euphrates to the West, its importance to ancient cultures could not be overstated. The river runs roughly from north to south, bisecting Helmand into two equal halves. Unusually, it is a river destined never to complete a natural journey to the sea. In the far south the river curls west dispersing in a boggy area of underground aquifers known as the Sistan Marshes, before finally running its course in the Hamun-i-Helmand lake region, on the Afghan-Iranian border. As late as the Middle Ages, this was an area of cultivation and culture. In the modern period, Sistan is better known as one of the windiest and most inhospitable deserts in the world. The name Helmand was well chosen. It means ‘many dams’, an echo of the other name by which it is known: the *hazar shakha* or ‘thousand branch river’. In the spring the river coils from Kajaki District in the north to Dishu District in the south, forming hundreds of rivulets and sandbars along a wadi bed, swollen with winter rains. When it flows as a torrent the river can easily tip over a truck unwarily attempting to ford. In the height of summer, a man might cross the river at its widest point, skipping from sandbar to sandbar.

If the Helmand River is the province’s blessing it is also its curse. An aerial image of Helmand reveals why. The majority of the province is a tawny colour indicating rocky desert, or a darker brown indicating mountain. Running through the middle of the province is a thin ribbon of green showing cultivated lands on both banks of the Helmand River. A Lance Corporal Boyd who served with 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters) described this ground perfectly:

‘I realised that it was not desert at all but more like secondary jungle; jungle in places

which gave the enemy excellent cover and most tree lines offered the opportunity for the enemy to spring ambushes. Along each tree line, more often than not, there's a culvert that runs from tree line to tree line. Each field is roughly 150m to 200m square with tree lines and varying sizes of streams dividing each field.'[177]

In some places the ribbon is no more than two kilometres wide. In other areas the strip of cultivation extends for ten kilometres or more. Like the more famous Nile, the Helmand River delineates the boundaries of life and death. The gravel desert to the west of the river is known as the Dasht-e Margo, or 'desert of death'. To the east is the sandy Registan desert. For centuries the thin strip of fertile land between these two deserts had been dominated by a handful of tribes. In the modern era an influx of outsiders had arrived, encouraged by irrigation projects. The Soviet-Afghan War mixed up the tapestry of tribes still further. With population growth, an intense competition for land developed. Mirroring the river's seasonal cycle, Helmand annually spilled out a small army of young men without realistic prospect of land ownership or other useful employment. These men would make easy fodder for the insurgency.

To better harness the potential of the Helmand River, American engineers embarked on a series of ambitious projects that would transform Helmand into 'little America' and give the province its modern-day topography. This was Helmand's golden age and older residents still recalled this period with fondness. Forty years later an Afghan chef in a Lashkar Gah guesthouse was still turning out stick-in-the-rib dishes and could reportedly sing the words to 'Deep in the Heart of Texas'.[178]

The centrepiece of the projects was a dam, built in 1953 near a village called Kajaki Sofla in the north. The project was overseen by a young American engineer named James Dunn who took to dressing in traditional Afghan garb.[179] Over 100 metres tall and 250 metres wide the dam created a reservoir of shimmering turquoise beauty, the Band–e Kajaki. The purpose of the dam was to generate electricity for the growing Helmandi economy, spurred by canal building and reclamation projects further south. The turbine hall itself would only finally be completed in the 1970s, before work had to be abandoned following the Communist takeover. The power infrastructure needed to distribute the electricity, however, was never completed turning Kajaki into a white elephant. Thirty years later a dedicated band of local workers and a single American engineer known as 'Kajaki Bob' were keeping the last turbine running. When the Soviets arrived they took over the dam and built a small airstrip on the other side of the river, alongside an existing small settlement called Tangye. Over the course of the war, fierce fighting depopulated the

area, creating a legacy of antipathy towards foreigners that would rebound against the British. After the Soviet withdrawal the locals returned to the area and built a bazaar on the abandoned airstrip. The 100 metre long wooden bridge joining the bazaar to the dam in the meantime began to rot and was no longer safe except for light vehicles. In the shadow of the dam a collection of stone-built villas had been built. It was claimed that these were holiday homes for Afghanistan's last king, or perhaps a rest area for Soviet troops. Later a police station and prison were added, which quickly became dilapidated.

A visitor to Kajaki could see evidence of the Soviet occupation everywhere. On the hills immediately overlooking the dam were numerous abandoned outposts, *zastavas*, some of which were occupied by a militia acting as the dam guard force. When the British arrived they would take over the easternmost positions. Two kilometres further north the maps clearly showed clusters of former Soviet defensive positions dug into the hills with textbook regularity. A wartime Wermacht officer would have smiled with recognition at these trench lines, laid out in depth and providing mutual support against any would-be attacker. The Russians also buried hundreds of mines in the area. Mine-clearance had long been abandoned in favour of local knowledge and the custom of using white and red painted stones to indicate hazardous areas. When the British set up their base, this local knowledge was not tapped, contributing to one of the controversial incidents of the early campaign. Unlike the Soviets, the British would never extend their presence north of the dam – they never had the numbers – but chose to remain within the dam complex in what would become known as FOB (Forward Operating Base) Zeebrugge, after a Royal Marine battle honour. The old Soviet positions on the 1,000 metre high mountain overlooking the dam, which offered commanding views of the entire area, were also occupied.

After Kajaki Dam, the most important project undertaken by American engineers was the reclamation of land in central Helmand. This was undertaken under the auspices of an organisation eventually titled the Helmand Arghandab Valley Authority (HAVA), and built on work by Japanese engineers undertaken in the 1930s. It created the prosperous new farming district Nad-e Ali that would become important to the British (Nad-e Ali is 'the Call of Ali', the poem attributed to one of the wives of the prophet Mohammed). Between 1953 and 1973, 5,000 farming families were resettled in the area representing a wide range of ethnic and tribal groups. Over $137 million was invested in the region by the Agency for International Development. This massive investment was not entirely altruistic. With a menacing Soviet Union across the border, the United States government was now playing the great game but with aid rather than guns (the Kabul government deliberately chose the United States as its sponsor because it was not tarnished with a

colonial brush). During this period the United States pledged to spend one dollar for every rouble spent by the Soviet government in Afghanistan.[180] A silly game of prestige projects developed: in retaliation for a $3 million Soviet-built passenger terminal in Kabul, the US government built a $15 million airport and 180 room hotel in Kandahar, a vanity project which raised even American eyebrows when it was pointed out that, on average, the swanky airport handled precisely one flight per day. Foreign aid represented about 40 per cent of the government budget, an imbalance that persisted for the next four troubled decades.

Neither was the motivation of the Afghan government altruistic. The Helmand Valley project was driven by a political imperative to buy-off Afghanistan's potentially troublesome southern tribes with the promise of land ownership. The subsequent land reforms – particularly during the Taraki presidency – proved disastrous, and there is a strong argument that all of Helmand's subsequent ills dated from this period.[181] The new settlers joined existing communities that had cultivated this land for several centuries. The village of Sayedad in southern Nad-e Ali, for example, was the home of a score of surviving descendants of a holy man named Mir Salim who had settled the land 400 years earlier. His shrine still existed at the northern end of the village and his fragmented family continued to receive religious tributes from scattered tribal members in northern Afghanistan. This was a culture with long memories.

The model for this grand land reclamation scheme was a similar project in Tennessee. From the air, the re-modelled Nad-e Ali, with its neat grid-pattern of canals and tracks looked much like the American mid-West. Three major canals were dug or improved, the Darvishan, the Nahr-e Bugra and the Shamalan (meaning 'North Wind'). These complemented the Nahr-e Saraj canal at Gereshk that had been dug in 1910 by German engineers. The original focus of the project was on three areas: Nad-e Ali itself, Shamalan and East Marjah. A metalled road, Highway 1, was constructed connecting Gereshk to Kandahar (built by the Soviets who seized on the chance to upstage the Americans). This was the only metalled road in the entire province and one section of the Afghan 'ring road' which joined the country in one continuous loop. The Americans also created hard gravel routes that ran with Roman-like straightness across the land. These contrasted with traditional Afghan caravan routes that meandered across the undulating desert terrain.

To coordinate the project American engineers proposed building an entirely new town at a point on the Helmand River that was equidistant between the reclaimed lands and anticipated markets. This point was Lashkar Gah just north of the ancient and now

abandoned site of a former Ghaznavid fort. Then known as Lashkari Bazaar, the site also fulfilled another important criteria, namely that it possessed ‘natural beauty and potential for healthful living’.[182] The site was chosen by an American engineer named Frank Patterson and he estimated that over 1,000 American workers and their dependants would need offices and homes. Over a ten year period he hoped the economic stimulus would grow the town to a population of about 10,000, which proved a wild underestimate.

There is no memorial to Frank Patterson but there should be because he became the founding father of Helmand’s largest town and eventual provincial capital. In many respects, Patterson created Helmand Province. The site of the ancient capital – first trashed by Genghis Khan and finally razed by Timurlane – had for the last 500 years been overshadowed by the more prosperous Gereshk. All that remained of its former glory were some old medieval ruins, a dilapidated roadside bazaar and a handful of farms. Now the Americans turned around the relative importance of the two locations. Modern houses with large gardens were built alongside an administrative city centre. Tree-lined boulevards were laid out. Two archaeological sites that were judged to be of limited interest were bulldozed over. The new housing estates also followed the traditional American grid pattern and contrasted with the warren of compound houses in the sprawl of suburbs built later by Afghans, attracted to Lashkar Gah by the economic boom. Locals would say that when the Americans built the houses, there were no walls. The walls came later, with the Soviet occupation and collapse of civil order. In the rejuvenated Lashkar Gah a smart new hospital, schools and government offices were built. Public gardens, a sports stadium, a bank, a cinema and club house were added. The Helmand River was spanned with a modern bridge. An ornate mosque, Helmand’s architectural jewel, was built. An airstrip, Bost airport, was added south of the town. A light industrial park sprung up. This was Yankee frontier spirit at its energetic best. When the British arrived in 2006, Lashkar Gah had a population of 150,000 and was a mixed, relatively cosmopolitan town. Frank Patterson’s vision had flourished in ways he probably never imagined.

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The impact of the American tenancy of Lashkar Gah was dramatic. Literacy rates across Afghanistan were very low; less than one in ten Afghans could read and write. By 1970, a third of all young people in Lashkar Gah were literate thanks to the American schools (although female literacy remained at a stubborn five per cent).[183] Lashkar Gah caught up with Kabul and even produced ten doctorates of science, which did include three women, a quite unheard-of achievement in rural Afghanistan. In common with other

boom regions, a disparity grew between the ratio of men and women. Many more young migrant men arrived in Lashkar Gah, landless bachelors seeking to make their fortune. This swelling army of men would become the mujahidin and ultimately the Taliban foot soldiers of the future. American planners tried to encourage their Afghan counterparts to provide employment for the large, economically inactive female population but such schemes constantly butted against Pashtun conservatism. An urban rich – by Afghan standards – began to grow. A Lashkar Gah resident working in the town could expect to pocket about 500 Afghanis at the end of each month. A cousin working in the fields was making do on about 350 Afghanis. None of this implied great wealth. Across the district, annual income hovered around $70. As much as a third of the population was living on much less and Afghanistan continued to sit at the bottom of the pile of the UN's poverty table. Your best bet was to work for a generous American engineer or to fall back on the time-honoured practice of extorting bribes, a habit euphemistically described as 'a manipulative/extractive orientation' in one American report.[184]

The reclamation of Nad-e Ali created winners and losers. The American intention had been to create equal land distribution by allocating 66 *jerribs (*one *jerrib* is about half a hectare*)* to each family. On average, families ended up with about 40 *jerribs.* Many ended up with much less. In traditional Pashtun society land was held as common lots or *daftar*. These tribal plots would then be divided into family lots called *brakha,* and finally into individual lots called *patti*. Ownership passed along lines of primogeniture but other male siblings were entitled to third, sixth and twelfth portions. In villages, the *brakha* system was replaced by a similar model known as *kandai*. All these practices were based on the principle of egalitarianism and were designed to avoid land disputes.

The American project in part failed because these traditional ways broke down in the face of newly-introduced market forces and competition over land rights. In many areas, land ownership passed to the powerful and corrupt, with the dispossessed reduced to working as day labourers (*buzgars*) and sharecroppers (*kashtagars*). The big winners were the *khans,* or powerful village landlords. These trends were exacerbated by the fact that the President of HAVA became the governor of Helmand and rivalled government ministers. The temptation for nepotism in these circumstances was simply irresistible. The ineptitude of Afghans staffing the HAVA – almost all outsiders – was also staggering. When Kajaki Dam opened nobody thought to tell the farmers that Helmand Valley was about to receive a massive influx of water, with predictable disastrous consequences.

Another flaw in the scheme was the quality of the settlers – almost half were nomads

with no farming knowledge, deliberately resettled by the Kabul government. The routes of the original canals, which the American engineers were forced to follow against their own recommendations, actually interfered with the natural drainage of the Helmand River, creating areas of saline deposits. One government-built village was entirely abandoned by its settlers who struggled with the ruined soil. Soil degradation then became a constant theme which depressed farm incomes. When it finally ended in 1974, the Helmand Valley Development Project was remembered as an expensive failure, or as one report put it: 'the Helmand valley watershed was a gargantuan job with Sisyphean elements'.[185] It was ironic that in the end, Helmand's more prosperous farmers turned out to be those using traditional drainage and farming methods outside the areas reclaimed by HAVA. With the passage of years, perhaps a more generous judgement may be made. The American *mea culpa* in Helmand was overdone. Despite the mistakes and wrong turns, the period 1950-70 can only be remembered as a golden age, and it was due to that unique combination of American idealism matched by plenty of dollars.

The HAVA project was finally killed off by the Soviet-Afghan War. At first the Soviets ignored the Helmand, only caring that the Herat-Gereshk-Kandahar route remained open. Later they deployed up to 500 troops at Bost Airfield, a number that rose to about 1,500 by the time of withdrawal.[186] Soviet priorities matched the subsequent British plan for Helmand, with a focus on the central districts. The road from Lashkar Gah, through Chah-e Anjir, and north to Gereshk had to be secured. Patrol bases were established in a ring extending from Nawa, Aynak, Bolan, Luy Bagh, Chah-e-Anjir and Basharan. A similar ring of bases was established around Gereshk, from Abhashak Wadi, through Abhazan, to Deh Adam Khan. The hill overlooking Gereshk was taken over by an artillery unit, as the British would do, and was known as '*taapuh*' by the locals.[187] Unlike the British, the Soviets never bothered to attempt to 'secure' Helmand's Green Zone, but they did mount punitive operations in Now Zad, Musa Qaleh, and Sangin. Mostly they allowed the various mujahidin groups to fight each other – incited by the Khad (the Afghan domestic security service) – and they paid militias to fight. Neither the Soviets nor the Khad ever truly understood the power dynamics in the province, nor was it appreciated that the chief cause of violence was inter-tribal disputes, not national politics, still less ideological struggles.[188]

By 1990, when American engineers and aid workers returned to survey Helmand after fifteen years of warfare, the landscape had greatly changed.[189] About one quarter of the productive land was now uncultivated, a measure of the collapse of irrigation systems and

population loss. Nascent industries such as cotton gins (actually built by the British) had completely collapsed. The airport at Bost was a minefield. Roads were being reclaimed by the desert sands and tracks were rutted and pot-holed. The greatest evidence of war damage was on the old frontline that ran across Marjah and Nad-e Ali districts west Lashkar Gah. Most visibly, the cereal crops that had once earned Helmand the nickname of 'Afghanistan's bread basket' had been replaced by fields of opium poppies. This crop required neither good soil nor a farming knowledge of traditional crops that the new settlers lacked anyway. Better than that, the profits from this crop were instant and outstripped traditional crops. When the British arrived in Helmand in 2006 they were joining a narrative of failures, broken promises and wars that stretched back to the 1950s. This was not understood by the over-confident British planners who agreed to take on Helmand.

The Helmand Valley Reclamation Project also had important demographic consequences. Above all Helmand was tribal, or as a 19th century Briton would have put it 'barbarous'. However, the meaning of 'tribal' by the end of the 20th century was a subject of academic dispute with many scholars arguing that Pashtuns identified first with their *qawm* – a 'social solidarity group' – which could be cross-tribal.[190]

This tribal mix was greatly complicated by the influx of migrants and the deliberate creation of areas of heterogeneous tribal identities. The tensions that existed between rival tribes and clans would have been entirely familiar to a European living in the Dark Ages. Loyalty stretched in a series of concentric circles from one's immediate male authority figure, a father or husband, to the patriarch of that family group, a male elder, to the leader of the clan group which encompassed a number of family groups, all closely related through marriage and living in one or more settlements bound together by tribal affiliations. This hierarchy of *kor* (family), *khel* (clan group), and *zai*, or tribe, defined your identity. *Zai* literally means 'son of', hence the Barakzai, a large tribe in Helmand, are 'the sons of Barak'. A primitive but rigorous democracy governed the everyday life of communities, dominated exclusively by the males. Each family group had its mosque, which acted as the communal hall and in some settlements as cemetery. There was little need to stray beyond the boundary of fields which defined your clan or tribal area. A girl could grow up, marry, bear children and die without ever having left the immediate environs of the dozen compound farm buildings that made up her village. Beyond this world there were the modern political creations of a head of district, and a provincial governor, but these were distant figures. Kabul – seat of the national government - was

utterly remote. Following the New York terrorist attacks there were Afghans with only the vaguest sense of the import of the events that were about to change their lives. America may well have been on the moon. So for that matter could London, Glasgow or Belfast. Several years after the entry of the British in Helmand, this was still the case with many farmers still ignorant as to why a British military force was decamping in their fields.

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Southern Afghanistan is dominated by Pashtun tribes. There are two major confederations – the Durrani and Ghilzai – comprising sixty major tribes, and over 400 clans. The largest tribal group in Helmand are the Durrani Pashtuns, who have also been the dominant confederation in Afghanistan since the end of the 18th century. Well known to the British, they were described in a 1936 Indian Army guide to the Pathans (the common name for the modern-day Pashtun) as comprising of eight sub-tribes, all of which were still recognisable when the British task force marched into Helmand seventy years later. The name Durrani came from the pearl stud worn in the right ear of the founder of the branch, Ahmad Shah Abdali, a Sarbani Pathan. The more accurate name would have been Tarins as Ahmad Shah Abdali was the descendant of a legendary figure called Tarin, a founding father of great renown within the Pathan hierarchy. The Indian Army knew them as a tribal group straddling both sides of the Durand Line, a point of some strategic significance when the British found themselves fighting the modern-day descendants in the form of the Taliban movement. As part of a policy of pacification, the British recruited from the Durrani confederation - as they did from many compliant Pathan tribes - but did not find them to be especially good soldiers.[191] They made far better guerrillas.

In the 1930s the relative importance and distribution of the Durrani tribes in Helmand and Kandahar was different. Ishakzais were known to live along the banks of the Helmand as for north as Gereshk and as far south as the Sistan Marshes near the Iranian border. Alizais were settled north of Gereshk. Noorzais also had a colony in Gereshk but mainly lived between Quetta and Kandahar. Popalzais and Achakzais also lived around Kandahar. The most powerful tribe, the Barakzais, were known to monopolise the best land and held most of the important civil and military appointments. Alikozais, it was said, ‘were scattered everywhere’.

By the time the British returned in 2006, the tribal map had grown more complex and mixed. The Barakzai, divided into seven branches, still dominated the capital Lashkar Gah and were also strongly represented south of the capital in Nawa-e Barakzai District and in Nahr-e Saraj District. They also maintained a lodgement in Maruf District in Kandahar

Province. As this tribe controlled some of the prime opium poppy growing land in central Helmand it was heavily implicated in the narcotics trade. The Barakzai were part of the ‘aristocratic’ Zirak branch of the Durrani confederation, along with the less numerous Alikozai, Achakzai and Popalzai.

The other tribe that had come to dominate this illicit trade was the Ishaqzai, who would become implacable foes of the British. The Ishaqzai had become a virtual narco-tribe because they were strongly established in two key areas: Sangin in the north and Dishu in the south. Sangin was the centre of Helmand’s opium trade and held its largest market. As opium poppy cultivation expanded in Helmand it would become the centre of the narcotics trade in Afghanistan. Dozens of opium processing labs were established in outlying settlements especially to the north of the town. Dishu was important because it sat on the Pakistan border and hosted the infamous Bahram Chah market, a beehive for cross-border smugglers. In Dishu and neighbouring Reg, the Ishaqzai shared the spoils with Baluchis, the inveterate travellers and smugglers of the lawless border lands. Ishaqzais were also strategically placed in Lashkar Gah, Gereshk, Garmsir and Now Zad. Periodically, drug wars would break out between the tribes and such a clash happened between the Ishaqzai and the Alikozai in 2006, which the British misinterpreted as a Taliban eruption. The other important point about the Ishaqzai was that they belonged to the lesser Panjpai (‘five fingers’) branch of the Durrani confederation, together with the Alizai and Noorzai. This made them the natural enemies of the aristocratic Barakzai.

The Alizai, who divided into three branches - Hassanzai, Pirlai and Khalozai - were the other great players in the Helmand. The Alizai had always been present in northern Helmand, as the 1936 Indian Army guide recorded, but in latter years the tribe had grown to become one of the most numerically strong in Helmand. Squeezed by population growth the Alizai had begun to encroach southwards into Ishaqzai and Alikozai lands north of Sangin (eventually provoking a clash in 2007 which the British optimistically hoped signalled a tribal revolt against the Taliban). The Alizai were also in conflict with the Popalzai over control of Highway 1 east of Gereshk. The tribal heartlands were in Musa Qaleh district where the opium poppy was cultivated on an industrial scale, but the Alizai were also well represented in Baghran and Kajaki. Although the Alizai belonged to the lesser Panjpai branch of the Durrani confederation the tribe dominated Helmand politics thanks to the leadership shown by the Akhundzada family during the Afghan-Soviet War. When the British drove into Lashkar Gah, Sher Mohammed Akhundzada, a relative of the mujahidin leader, was governor of Helmand Province.

Lastly there were the Noorzai, a tribe strongly represented on both sides of the Durand Line. The days when the Noorzai were mainly a poor tribe with a foothold in Gereshk had long passed. During the 1950s, Noorzai had flooded into Nad-e Ali, grabbing prime land. They were followed by Baluchis, Kakars, Kharoteis and other Pashtun tribes. Uzbeks and Tajiks from the north also settled in Nad-e Ali, as well as the exotic Hazaras, regarded as satanic by the Taliban. Noorzai also migrated south to Garmsir, an important junction for smugglers travelling between Lashkar Gah and the Pakistan border. Their presence in Spin Boldak, the main border crossing point south of Kandahar, and the existence of Noorzai communities in Baluchistan endowed them with a formidable smuggling network. Noorzai dominance of Nad-e Ali naturally set them against the Barakzai in Lashkar Gah. This rivalry would come to a head in the summer of 2008 when Barakzai would try to push poppy eradication initiatives away from their lands in Nawa-e Barakzai and onto Noorzai lands in Nad-e Ali.

Any survey of Pashtun tribes in Helmand – including the one just offered - was necessarily a simplification. The two urban centres, Lashkar Gah and Gereshk, like all large towns, had mixed the tribal genes. The combination of the economic boom in the 1950-70s, followed by the trauma of war and civil war, had mixed the pool still further. The strength of tribal loyalty varied and cross-tribal cooperation was as evident as inter-tribal rivalry. The Taliban had scratched the picture further by encouraging pan-tribal power structures (although only amongst their own favoured Pashtun tribes). Anyone seeking to understand Helmand through its tribal delineations was as likely to be confused as illuminated. Four years after deploying to Helmand the British would still not have accurately mapped or fully understood the tribal dynamics of the province.

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Understanding Pashtun culture also confounded expectations. The dour, puritan vision of ‘Pashtunistan’ offered by the Taliban was far from the experience of the British in the inter-war years. Soldiers were advised that tribes often indulged in communal dances accompanied by drums, violins and flageolets. These dances resembled *bangash bangra* or *bulbulla* dances with groups forming circles and stamping the ground. They were fond of *hujras* – a sort of large social gathering in the village guest house – where music was played and poetry recited. Much of the poetry had a strong erotic content and was filled with awful double entendres which made the tribesmen break out into peals of laughter. There was little difference in the dress of men and women and both were colourful, commonly denoting tribal affiliations through the colour combinations or other ornamental

details. Women typically wore a *khat*, a long skirt, rather than the *kamiz*, or long shirt worn by men. Their *partug*, or trousers, were generally looser than those worn by men. Wealth and marriage were denoted by silver coins stitched to the front of shirts and silver bracelets, necklets and earrings were invariably worn by all women. A head scarf, or *oranai*, was also worn but it was not obligatory and it had nothing to do with religious strictures. Women also held their own parties accompanied by the professional class of musicians or *mirasis*, typically on festival days. Much of their time was occupied with the hard graft of survival, although, it was recorded, Thursdays were generally reserved for visiting graveyards. These were, of course, deeply conservative societies, but the repression of women and the obligatory wearing of burqas are modern inventions. As late as the 1960s, a Pan Am flight could land at Kandahar and an American air hostess walk across the tarmac in a short skirt, and no Afghan would pay the slightest attention.

At the heart of Pashtun culture was the *puktunwali* code, known in the modern period as *pashtunwali*. This code of conduct was not written anywhere and it has been argued that it was a construct of early British anthropology trying to gain an understanding of the Pathans. The earliest written record of Pashtun values – a prose work by the Pashto poet Khushhai Khan Khattak (1613-1689) – neither used the word, nor described the values that would later be codified as *pashtunwali*.[192] The twenty virtues described in his book, the *Dastarmana* (‘Book of the Turban’), rather described a set of desirable ethical and social qualities that were commonplace across central Asia, including an ability to hunt. Modern references to *pashtunwali* only date to the 1950s and were coined by the ‘Awakened Youths’ movement (*Wesh Zalmiyan*) who saw in the code a useful patriotic and nationalist identity.

A 1938 British Army guide advised that *puktunwali* was ‘framed on principles of equity and retaliation’.[193] The three maxims of the code were protection (*nanawatai*), retaliation (*badal*), and an obligation to demonstrate hospitality or *mailmastia*. It was later argued that the principles of *nanawatai* and *mailmastia* were invoked by Mullah Omar when the American government put pressure on the Taliban regime to hand over Osama bin Laden. A good Pashtun was obliged to offer protection to a weaker party or refugee, even at risk to his own life, until the matter could be settled by a chief, or *malik*, or by holding a *jirga* and coming to a decision through a community debate. *Mailmastia* was considered a sacred duty and anyone offering *mailmastia* was duty bound to ensure that their guest came to no harm. The rootless Taliban that drifted from district to district in Helmand were able to do so partly because of the principle of *mailmastia* and partly

because an AK-47 assault rifle has a certain persuasive force. Even when farmers were not happy at the prospect of gangs of armed, young men decamping in their settlements - because they would attract trouble from the British - they still felt obliged to offer them traditional hospitality and even to abet them when they were threatened. In fact, Mullah Omar's defence of bin Laden as a manifestation of *pashtunwali* may have been over-stated. It appears more likely the Taliban leadership felt insulted when the American government refused to countenance a bin Laden trial in an Islamic court, which was offered as a compromise. It was the suggestion that Sharia was in some way inferior to Christian law that slammed the door shut, not a contravention of the *pashtunwali* code.

Badal, or retaliation, was the duty of any male subjected to injury or insult. Failure to exact *badal* resulted in loss of face within the clan or tribe. Every male tribesman killed by a British soldier was incitement to *badal* and the more tribesmen the British killed, the wider the blood feud extended, like an uncontrollable Ponzi scheme. If any single factor was going to unhinge the British campaign in Helmand it was this ancient impulse to blood feuds, as indeed it did. Perversely, this was never properly acknowledged by the British who continued to kill tribesmen to the very end, guaranteeing that the final British soldier to leave would do so with the sound of a vengeful bullet whistling past his ear. This, in fact, is what happened: the last British shots fired in anger were loosed off by 7 Force Protection Wing of the RAF Regiment, one week before the last soldier quit the province eight years later.[194]

Badal could be provoked in any number of ways: land quarrels, debt disputes, violations of safe conduct, murder, and intrigues with women. The army guide warned that however trifling the dispute might seem to an outsider, the feud would 'last for years', as the British were about to rediscover. Given this propensity to indulge in perpetual blood feuds, the Pathan was 'invariably armed with a knife, sword, pistol, jezail or rifle, and with a banderole or belt or ammunition'.[195]

Pashto developed a vivid vocabulary to cover all the different shades of *badal*, which British soldiers were advised to learn. A *chigha* was a pursuit party. *Saz* and *zakhmana* were blood and wound money respectively. Girls, like cattle, were exchangeable commodities (a practice still common in modern Helmand amongst farmers owing debt to drug dealers). If you carried off someone's daughter you could pay *sharam* to settle the matter, or the aggrieved family could commit *swara* and steal one of your daughters in revenge. The aim of all these unwritten rules was to achieve *rogha* or settlement, even if it meant paying *bonga*, or ransom money.

Although the Pashtuns were the dominant ethnic group in Helmand, they were not the only group. There were also the Baluchis, Uzbeks, Tajiks, nomadic Kuchis, among many other groups. When British cartographers finally compiled a general tribal map of Helmand province in 2007, they needed a twenty-three bar colour code.[196] It was this map, as much as any other single document that eloquently illustrated the complex web of power relations in which the British had become embroiled. In the 19th century there may have been a political officer that could speak the language, who had gone native, and who could guide a military commander through this maze of tribes (although political officers were frequently ignored), but no such animal existed in the 21st century British Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

All these tribes lived in characteristic adobe, walled compounds, the 'million Alamos' as the American ex-special forces officer turned journalist, Michael Yon, would describe them. Building technology had not advanced since Biblical times. Almost all were one storey buildings and seldom higher than ten feet. Furniture was extremely sparse: inside one might find a corn bin (*kandu*) for immediate use; some beds (*kat*), stools (*katkai*) and cots (*zango*). Children were everywhere. Cooking was done over open fires or clay ovens. In the courtyard there were often sheds for the domestic animals as well as a much larger corn bin, the *khamba,* in which a year's supply of grain was held. Small fruit gardens and even flower gardens were cultivated in the larger compounds. Soldiers could generally distinguish the headman's house by the size of his garden. Modern-day soldiers would joke that this house was readily identified because it was the only house in the village with glass in the windows.

The tribesmen that would turn against the British were accurately described in a 1945 platoon commander's guide to frontier warfare:[197]

'They are a poor but hardy race. Brought up in an atmosphere of hereditary blood feuds, they are experts in self-preservation, and every boy learns to handle a rifle at an early range. They have many good qualities, among which manliness, hospitality, a sturdy spirit of independence, and a good sense of humour predominate; but on the other hand the trans-frontier Pathan is often fanatical, cruel and treacherous.'

In the sixty odd years that elapsed between the drafting of Indian Army Pamphlet No 16 'Platoon Leading in Frontier Warfare' and the arrival of the British task force in Helmand, nothing had changed, or it seemed, had been learned.

The wartime army pamphlet offered good advice relevant to the modern-day

commander. The Pathans were experts at guerrilla warfare. They were extremely mobile compared to the slow-moving British forces. The Pathan was very good at tracking the movements of the imperial forces (called ‘dicking’ by the modern day British soldier from the experience of the Northern Ireland campaign), but ‘accurate intelligence about his movements is hard to get’.[198] The suicide attacker was a threat then; they were known as ‘ghazis’. Without the benefit of the improvised explosive device (IED), they demonstrated fanatical bravery, launching themselves with grenades and knives at the British, knowing full well they would not survive the encounter but that they might manage to take the lives of a few infidel soldiers before losing their own. ‘Ghazis’ were as uncommon as suicide bombers in Helmand, but they commanded fear. Later in the war, ‘Ghazis’ would be reinvented as ‘insider’ or Blue on Green attacks.

The more typical tactic was the long range sniping attack, which the British would become very familiar with:[199]

‘More often he is a cautious fighter who prefers to keep his distance and take full advantage of his remarkable capacity for using ground and keeping concealed to snipe without being seen. He will weigh the risks of action at close quarters very carefully and will generally only attempt it when he sees a 100 per cent chance of success with minimum loss to himself.’

Alongside sniping attacks, the greatest skill of the Pathan was the planning and the laying of ambushes, which he did with infinite care and patience. Just because no tribesmen can be seen, the pamphlet warned, do not assume that they are not there skulking and waiting for the optimum moment to initiate an ambush. Typically this would take the form of an L-shaped ambush, a favourite Taliban tactic in Helmand (echoing the sentiments of a modern-day Paratrooper section commander who observed that fighting the Taliban was a ‘360 degree battle’). To counter this hardy foe, a stout heart and steady aim was advised. Only these would have a lasting moral effect on the enemy. A surprise attack was also likely to make the Pathan go to pieces. Any sign of weakness or loss of resolve, on the other hand, was quickly exploited. ‘They have been described, with some truth, as the best umpires in the world,’ the pen picture concluded.[200]

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Tactical skills required to fight the Pathan remained relevant in the modern insurgency in Afghanistan. Vigilance against the cunning ways of the tribesmen was vital. A soldier needed the keenness of eye of a schoolboy finding a bird’s nest – the same keenness of eye

would save the lives of countless soldiers spotting the tell-tale signs of road side bombs. Cultivating a suspicious mind was one of the keys to personal survival in Afghanistan. Routes should be varied, sentry positions routinely changed, and piquets (never less than two men) had to be posted, the same disciplines that would mark the war in Helmand.

Speed of action was considered the most important factor in frontier warfare: 'Most frontier operations are a race against time'.[201] Security was also best achieved through speed, the very point that would be made by Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Tootal, the first commanding officer of the battlegroup destined for Helmand. The problem for the British was they could no longer achieve this speed. Weighed down like medieval knights with body armour that was as heavy as it was uncomfortable, the basic building block of section tactics – fire and manoeuvre – would be replaced simply by fire. Tens of thousands of tons of high explosives would be expended as a substitute for manoeuvre, damaging swathes of Helmand where the fighting was heaviest. In this sense the British would mirror the Soviets, although scorched earth was never a deliberate policy or practice. It was a principle of frontier warfare that no movement could be undertaken without first establishing covering fire from artillery, mortars and machine guns. Even a short move of a few hundred yards from an established camp to a piquet point required this careful preparation. In Helmand the same protective umbrella of fire had to be raised every time a patrol stepped out of the front gate of its patrol base to undertake a patrol.

Efficient 'intercommunications' were, naturally, vital across the vast distances and difficult topography of Afghanistan. A staff officer who served in Helmand later in the war was closer to the mark than he imagined when describing modern British Army communications systems as World War 1 standard. One of the most frustrating aspects of the war would be the troubled Bowman radio system, rushed into service after years of procurement blunders, and as quickly side-lined in favour of commercial radio systems bought off the shelf, to make up for the deficiencies encountered using this system in Afghanistan. Political sensitivity over this blunder was acute, not helped by servicemen openly complaining that Bowman was 'not fit for purpose'.

Offensive action was the other key to winning against the Pathan. 'It is more than ever important to cultivate the offensive spirit by every possible means' the tactics pamphlet advised.[202] Wit, ingenuity and a poacher mentality were encouraged. Nothing lowered the morale of the Pathan more than being beaten at his own game. The frontier wars were about being better guerrillas than the guerrillas themselves, not setting up Roman-style garrisons. The ambush was not just the favoured tactic of Pathan tribesmen - it was also

the Indian Army's favourite tactic. In Helmand the ambush would largely remain the preserve of the Taliban. For much of the war the British would be the prey and the Taliban the hunter. From the beginning, Tootal could see the British force become fixed in this way, but he would be powerless to stop it. As the war progressed and the British became more entrenched in an American-inspired doctrine of clear-hold-build, the possibility of waging an offensive mobile campaign like their imperial predecessors passed and would be replaced by the grind of attrition warfare.

The most salient fact about Helmand Province, other than its complex tapestry of tribes, was that it was at the centre of Afghanistan's opium trade. When *Jane's*, the defence journal specialists, wrote a lengthy article examining the imminent deployment of the British task force, it was entitled: *British forces enter 'Opiumland*.[203] This point seemed self-evident but the British task force was determined to avoid becoming embroiled in a drug war.

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The British government certainly had reasons to be concerned with Helmand's status as narco-province. There were about 320,000 heroin users in Britain consuming over 18 tons annually.[204] According to the Home Office, tackling drug addiction was costing the British taxpayer £15 billion annually or a third of the defence budget. Britain alone accounted for 21 per cent of the entire consumption of heroin in Europe – the worst figures on the continent. The most blighted area was Scotland. The Glasgow-based Strathclyde police estimated that there were 367 gangs in the trade with an annual turnover of £1.4 billion.[205] One in every hundred Scots was a heroin addict, a ratio only surpassed by countries like Afghanistan (UNODC also ranked Scotland as the highest cocaine consumer in the world). The number of people who died from heroin overdoses in NATO countries, overall, exceeded the number of NATO soldiers killed in Afghanistan by a factor of five in the first eight years of the war. Globally, the trade was estimated to be worth about $65 billion. Heroin was unquestionably a blight ruining thousands of lives and draining the British public purse, not a routine criminal problem.

The opium poppy had probably been cultivated in Afghanistan for centuries but it was only in the modern period, when Afghanistan became a stop-over on the hippy trail, that the cultivation became significant. This cultivation had a well defined cycle with the sowing taking place in late winter and the harvesting between March and April. Ironically it was the American land reclamation schemes in Helmand that had made the explosion of

the poppy crop possible because this was a plant that needed plenty of water, unlike the hardier wheat or cotton, the other two staples of the Helmand economy. The opium itself was the gum from the mature bulb of the opium poppy, *Papaver somniferum*, drawn by scoring it with a three-pronged ferrule or knife. Almost twenty varieties of opium poppy were cultivated in Afghanistan, ranging from a white flower to the traditional crimson bloom. The most popular were the *Watani Soorgulai*, *Watani Spingulai* and *Sebi*. Every spring an army of transient workers flooded Helmand to take part in the opium harvest. Many would remain behind to earn extra money as 'ten dollar Talibs' taking pot shots at the British. Without further refinement this gum was already a powerful and addictive narcotic. Additional chemical processing, which had roots in 19th century investigations into creating better opiates, produced the stronger derivative products morphine and heroin. Britain had once fought a war to promote the opium trade. Now it found itself the victim of this baleful drug and without a coherent plan to deal with the problem.

British policy towards the poppy cultivation was summed up by a senior Royal Marine officer, Colonel Gordon Messenger: 'There will be absolutely no Marines with scythes in a poppy field.'[206] He was speaking then in 2006 as a spokesman for his brigade. Two years later he would find himself back in Helmand province as the brigade commander of that selfsame brigade. There was little chance, in the beginning at least, that a British change of attitude was forthcoming. A reticence to embrace eradication – one obvious option and a policy endorsed by the US – created a friction between the allies which would not resolved until the Obama presidency when the US special representative to the region, Richard Holbrooke, declared poppy eradication one of the most pointless and wasteful programs he had ever encountered.

Three protagonists would become indelibly written into the story of the initial British deployment into Helmand, Operation Herrick 4. The first was the newly-appointed Secretary of State for Defence, John Reid. Reid had all the credentials for becoming a successful defence secretary having fought against the odds for most of his life. His father had been a postman in South Lanarkshire and his mother had worked in a factory. He left school at the age of sixteen and was largely self-taught, gaining a PhD in economic history as an adult. He struggled with alcohol and nicotine and eventually controlled both addictions. Anyone who dealt with John Reid could not help but be impressed by his combative and direct manner, earning him a reputation as the Labour Party's 'all purpose attack dog'. This old-fashioned socialist, steeped in a Scottish tradition of self-help and common sense, would be richly rewarded in the New Labour project eventually holding

seven different cabinet posts.

When Tony Blair appointed him as Defence Secretary he was simultaneously given the portfolio of Secretary of State for Scotland (the government hoped he would suffocate the nationalist Pandora's Box in the newly-created Scottish parliament). For the armed forces, locked in an increasingly unpopular war in Iraq, this double portfolio was perceived as an insult. The conclusion seemed inescapable – the government was more concerned with losing Labour seats to the ascendant Scottish Nationalist Party than with the lives of British servicemen. Like the remainder of the Blair cabinet, Reid had no war experience but he compensated for this lack of experience with good sense. His importance to the story was paradoxically his absence from the narrative at a crucial juncture. Reid was the single personality who may have saved Operation Herrick 4. In one of his last acts in post he displayed great instinct and questioned an expansion to the British mission - then being requested in Helmand – that would involve the deployment of British troops outside the agreed areas of Lashkar Gah and Gereshk. Following his departure on 5 May, this was overturned. In the end he quit his post having served one day less than a full year

The second protagonist in the drama was Brigadier Ed Butler, a contrasting personality to the Defence Secretary. Butler was the scion of a distinguished Conservative family. His grandfather 'Rab' Butler had been Winston Churchill's chancellor. His father, Adam Butler, had served as a junior minister under Margaret Thatcher. He joined the prestigious Royal Green Jackets, unofficially known as 'the Green Mafia' because of the number of generals this regiment churned out. His operational experience was exceptional: he had completed three tours of Northern Ireland (where he gained a Mentioned-in-Dispatches), as well as serving in the first Gulf War, Bosnia, Kosovo and Sierra Leone. As a young man he undertook SAS selection and proved one of the outstanding candidates of his intake, later returning as a squadron leader and earning a Distinguished Service Order in Afghanistan. He was one the army's youngest brigadiers, his soldiers respected him, and his fellow officers (perhaps with some envy) reckoned that he was destined to reach the top. Inoculated by his impeccable Eton education, Butler spoke and wrote in plain English, in an age when army officers had taken to writing in an impenetrable house style laden with jargon and euphemisms. With such a pedigree he was ripe for a fall but the manner in which it happened was shameful. Despite increasingly exasperated efforts to make sense of the mission, Ed Butler would become the quarry in the traditional Afghan game of *bushakzi* – except that his pursuers would be British government officials urging him to accede to the requests of the governor of Helmand; President Karzai who quickly became critical of the British mission; and the American military leadership in south-west

Afghanistan. There were also hints that senior British army officers whispered against him. Certainly, General David Richards describing him as ‘rogue’ was both unhelpful and unfair, and may have contributed to the later view that ‘it was all Butler’s fault’. This was nonsense – it wasn’t. In subsequent testimonies, senior figures bent over backwards to defend Butler, perhaps reflecting a sense of guilt over the way he was treated. Shortly after his return from Afghanistan he would resign from the army citing family reasons. The army would lose one of its best talents, the first high profile casualty of the war.

The last protagonist – Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Tootal - was the most junior but proved the most important British actor on Operation Herrick 4. This inversion of rank and responsibility was not accidental. For several months over the summer of 2006, British foreign policy in Afghanistan was effectively being delegated to this mid-ranking officer without the necessary support and backing from the Kabul Embassy, or from a British government distracted by domestic concerns, and without the full support of PJHQ which viewed Afghanistan as a sideshow. Tootal had originally joined the Queen’s Own Highlanders, a strong family regiment created from an amalgamation of the Cameron and Seaforth Highlanders. Later in his career, seeking a challenge, he volunteered to serve with the Parachute Regiment, a regiment with an equally strong but quite different ethos to the Highlanders. It was in the Parachute Regiment that Tootal found his spiritual home. When he was appointed commanding officer of the 3rd Battalion, a unit with a reputation as one of the hardest to manage, he was delighted. Tootal was a passionate man: he would without embarrassment describe his paratroopers as ‘beloved’. He was also a thoroughly professional and committed officer. He would be pitched into Afghanistan with scant intelligence and minimal resources and be asked, ultimately, to undertake an impossible mission. Like his immediate superior, Ed Butler with whom he enjoyed a close relationship, he too would resign from the army, disgusted by the aftercare given to wounded soldiers.

By the middle of 2005, the first two stages of the ISAF mission to Afghanistan had been completed with the deployment of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), and modest national contingents, to all but the south-west and eastern provinces of the country. With the deployment of British, Canadian and Dutch contingents to Helmand, Kandahar and Uruzgan respectively the third stage would be completed. In October 2006, the final and fourth stage would be finalised and this would allow the separate American Operation Enduring Freedom to surrender its regional commands to the wider ISAF operation in Afghanistan, and to focus on counter-terrorism. As terrorism and insurgency had become

indistinguishable, by implication, this meant counter-insurgency operations.

John Reid chaired the so-called ‘Reid Group’. This ad hoc committee included Nigel Sheinwald, Tony Blair’s foreign policy advisor; a junior foreign office minister usually delegating for Foreign Secretary Jack Straw; a junior minister delegating for the development secretary Hilary Benn; the chief secretary of the Treasury; senior military and civil service officials; and other advisors. It was later stated that discussion within this group was at an abstract level and did not consider detail - which is to say it was probably no discussion at all.[207] Some individuals later capitalised on having ‘the inside track’ on the Reid Group by writing articles for the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).[208] These pieces were notable for what they did not say, rather for than what they did say. The fact is the average Briton reading the essays would not have come away knowing when the decision to enter Helmand was taken or why, who was in the room, who dissented, what follow–up actions were proposed, what questions were raised, or what concerns were expressed.[209] Britons still don’t know who was behind ‘the Helmand decision’ and a war that cost the lives of over 450 British soldiers, and more than £37 billion in national treasure. Some laudable *mea culpas* aside, the essays mostly served as a dispiriting reminder of the cosy relations that exist between various individuals and organisations in Whitehall; the manner in which nobody must be seen to be responsible when a colossal blunder is made; and the impressive reach of brooms sweeping under deep carpets. The answers lie somewhere in the triangle of Prime Minister Blair, Defence Secretary Hoon, Foreign Secretary Straw, and their associated advisors and senior officials (including some senior military officers). The military axis lies between the Operations Directorate in MOD Main Building and PJHQ. However, it is appears unlikely that any actor will be forthcoming unless forced to do so by an inquiry. Some of the protagonists have of course by now published memoirs, but they were all apparently absent at the relevant meetings.

The single person who does emerge with great credit from this period is John Reid. From the outset, the defence secretary was at pains to emphasise that the British mission was about reconstruction and the spread of formal governance to areas ISAF had not yet reached: ‘Let me stress once more,’ he told Parliament, ‘we are deploying this potent force to protect and deter. The ISAF mission is unchanged. It is focussed on reconstruction.’ With a nod to the Treasury he indicated that the commitment would be limited both in time and money: ‘This will be a three year deployment. It will cost around one billion pounds over a five year period.’[210] Then, in March 2006, he uttered the infamous sentence at Kandahar Air Base: ‘If we came for three years here to accomplish our

mission and had not fired one shot by the end of it, we would be very happy indeed.'

These words were later widely quoted to ridicule the defence secretary as the purported reconstruction mission turned into a brawl. Ridicule may be strong but there are some serious questions hanging over this toxic choice of words. It appears, from Butler's testimony, that the phrase was actually coined by Butler in a meeting that morning, but to make exactly the opposite point – that the task force was almost certainly going to fire shots.[211] Reid borrowed the phrase later that afternoon and turned it on its head.

As far as Reid was concerned the Helmand mission *was* an extension of stabilisation operations the army had been conducting in Mazar-e Sharif and before that in Kabul. Butler has offered the astonishing revelation that on Reid's visit to Kabul in 23 April, he told Butler that nobody in the MOD had briefed him that Operation Herrick was a counter-insurgency mission and he questioned why the reconstruction mission was being effectively supplanted by a more aggressive mission.[212] This division of opinions - which nobody appeared to address in the build-up to the operation - finally come to a head in this last week of April; a little late as the paratroopers were already arriving in the province.

The possibility of confrontation was not dismissed. Reid acknowledged that some factions in Helmand might wish to derail the British PRT. But he was alluding to militias, of which there were at least a dozen in Helmand. Across Afghanistan, the UN estimated there were between 1,200 and 2,000 militias in the spring of 2006, comfortably out-gunning 'the Taliban'. 'The Taliban' were a secondary consideration, and if found, of course would be confronted. Al-Qaeda was dirty linen that belonged in the basket of the separate Operation Enduring Freedom.

Nobody demonstrated hindsight when Reid uttered the sentiment. Major General Wall who was closely engaged in intelligence assessments of the period later testified that 'we were ready for an adverse reaction, but to be fair we did not expect it to be as vehement as it turned out to be'.[213] Some claimed wisdom afterwards. Notwithstanding these exculpations, the puzzling aspect of Reid's wish is that it could not possibly have come true. Butler was right.

British soldiers were already firing shots in Helmand. A British special force contingent was taking part in unhelpful US-led operations that were riling the locals and generally causing trouble. The first British casualty of the year was a Royal Marine, wounded in action in mid-March, before the arrival of the task force. This special force campaign had an indirect and subtle influence on the British task force. Butler had already served two

tours in Afghanistan with 22 SAS. These experiences seemed to strongly bias his perception of the mission. In his view ‘we knew that we were going to generate a pretty angry reaction’. Furthermore, ‘We knew full well and made very clear to PGHQ [sic] and others in 2005…that we had underestimated both the enemy, their response and their capabilities and the nature of the terrain…’[214] As soon as he arrived in Afghanistan, in the first week of April ‘I had [discussions] with the embassy, the security services and the ambassador, we were very clear…the Taliban… were going to take the fight to us’.[215] Self-persuaded by this negative scenario – which it appears was shared, if not reinforced by the SIS station – Butler then set about trying to persuade Reid that a fight was not only inevitable but necessary.

His belief that there was a ‘fight waiting to happen’ was strengthened by two suicide car bomb attacks outside the Lashkar Gah PRT in the first two Fridays of April. However, these attacks may have been subjected to a certain amount of over-interpretation. The first was actually against American contractors, almost certainly provoked by unrest over opium eradication programs. The second, although it did involve a British military vehicle, may not necessarily have been directed against the British. The insurgents, much like ISAF, were not especially good at distinguishing their enemy. All Westerners were dumped in the same bucket. It could have been another mistaken attack against ‘the Americans’. But in Butler’s predisposed mind this was proof of ‘cause and effect’ which demanded the response of ‘going north’ after the Taliban, ‘to keep us free from attacks’. ‘If we just sat in our bases in Lashkar Gah, Gereshk and Bastion’ he later reasoned ‘the Talib would come and attack us there, which they had already done on two occasions [the two suicide attacks]’.[216]

When Reid arrived in the third week of April, Butler set about persuading him of this point of view:

‘For five days I stayed with him shoulder to shoulder, briefing him on what the issues were, what the challenges were, the lack of intelligence, the lack of a very clear mission, these competing missions. We also started discussing at that stage the whole issue of northern Helmand, delivering what became known as the Sangin effect. We always knew that Sangin was going to be an issue we were going to have to grapple with, even though it was outside the Afghan development zone - the triangle, as people referred to it. He was in no doubt when he left of the seriousness of the situation we had got into and *what we were going to have to do about it* [author’s emphasis]. I would challenge those who would say that the Secretary of State at the time was not aware of what *we were likely to have to do*

in order to fulfil our mission [author's emphasis].'[217]

Butler's own testimony therefore suggests that he had already made up his mind. The reconstruction mission intrinsic in the 'Helmand Plan', which remarkably 16 Air Assault Brigade had no part in formulating anyway, was going to be ditched, or at least suspended. Butler has not described Reid's reactions to his arguments, and the latter has been silent on the matter. It is unlikely that Reid turned a complete deaf ear to Butler's arguments, but by the former's testimony neither does it appear he was fully persuaded. Did he mollify Butler, but privately disagree? When he left office, just two weeks later, he had not authorised, and indeed was questioning any move north. Five weeks later he reported being surprised by the move north, which now seems somewhat disingenuous as he was aware of Butler's intentions.

Old Afghan-watchers did point out that Helmand would be a different proposition to the largely peaceful north of Afghanistan, but it was one thing to warn against the general lawlessness of the south-west – a factor that everybody acknowledged – and another to predict that Britain would be embroiled in a war that would cost much blood and treasure. Nobody really knew how many 'Taliban' there were in Helmand. Some thought there might be a few hundred fighters, mostly in the north, skulking in their old heartlands and making money from the opium trade. This appears to have been an assessment derived from the American obsession with labelling the tribal leader Rais Baghrani, a 'Taliban commander'. The probable truth was that there were very few actual 'Taliban' in Helmand at all - that is, fighters owing direct allegiance to Mullah Omar and seeking a return to the old order. Instead, there were armed groups who over the last twenty years had made a living as *Hizb-e Islami* and *Harakat* mujahidin, militiamen owing allegiance to powerful landowners, bent policemen, crooked security men, bandits, narcotics traffickers and highway toll collectors. There is evidence that by 2005, Mullah Omar's Quetta Shura had appointed Taliban shadow governors in Helmand, but it is unclear what power or status they held, or how many fighters they actually commanded.[218]

Aside from these tensions in the British camp there was the American commander in southern Afghanistan, Major General Benjamin Freakley. In early 2006, he indicated publicly that he would mount one last major offensive against the Taliban in Helmand, Kandahar and Uruzgan before handing over to ISAF and Richards.[219] This referred to what became known as Operation Mountain Thrust (May – July 2006). There was the taint of unfortunate American arrogance in this decision. ISAF, under Richards, was meant to have taken over from US forces (Combined Joint Task Force 76) in the spring of 2006,

coincident with the arrival of 3 Para, the lead unit in Task Force Helmand. However, the Americans were somewhat sceptical of ISAF's competence and capabilities. A decision was therefore taken to delay the handover for three months (Richards finally assumed full command on 1 August). During this period CJTF-76 would sort out the Taliban and thus set the conditions for ISAF's successful transition. This implied that all ISAF forces, for that period of three months, would fall under the American general. The likelihood was that British forces would fire shots – plenty of them – because the American general would co-opt the ISAF allies, British, Canadians and Dutch, into his offensive. This is exactly what happened.

Then there was Richards. The British general was involved in the decision-making that led to his assumption of full command being delayed. He interacted with the American general and with Canadians who were similarly affected through this period. Naturally, he was determined to demonstrate that American doubters were wrong. In the national chest thumping world of NATO, the way you did this was by mounting operations. Butler has written how there were rumblings, presumably from the American camp, of a NATO strategic failure.[220] The pressure was on. Reid may have been coming in peace, but the top British general was not. Following Operation Mountain Thrust, ISAF under Richards intended to mount its own offensive, Operation Medusa. Notwithstanding all the other good ideas that Richards brought with him and his wariness of the American muscular approach, as he put it, he also intended to show his biceps. One reviewer of his memoirs has not helped but notice that Richards seemed rather full of himself and devoted an inordinate number of pages to Operation Medusa (which, in fact, was something of a fiasco). Richards used the 'rogue' word with reference to Butler, but there is a case that he was being somewhat the 'rogue', if by rogue one means doing exactly the opposite of what the defence secretary has just stated in public he hoped not to do, namely, fire shots. Indeed, Richards was quite proud that he was something of a maverick.

A division then appears to have grown between the MOD and PJHQ that had one conception of the mission, and Butler, Richards, the Americans, and Canadians, who had another. The former were seeing a basically benign stabilisation operation, and the latter were talking and training for war. Reid seems to have been caught uncomfortably between the two blocs. He was certainly aware of Richards' views, as he was of his military advisors' opinions in the MOD. But Richards did not 'belong' to Reid, or the MOD; he was answering to the NATO chain of command. He was also aware of Butler's assessment of the situation, acutely and tardily in his last two weeks in office.

By late 2005, a British plan was devised over several weeks at Kandahar Air Base, by military and civilian experts, for the deployment to Helmand Province. The so-called Helmand Plan was long on management-speak and meaningless, development buzz-phrases, but this did not necessarily condemn it to failure. At the heart of the plan was 'the comprehensive approach' – a marriage of military security and civilian reconstruction. In John Reid's words:

'We in the British Government have undertaken an unprecedented degree of cross-governmental co-ordination to ensure that this is a fully integrated package addressing governance, security and political and social change.'[221]

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Afterwards it would be claimed that no plan survives contact with the enemy but this was weak justification for the collapse of the Helmand Plan. The central problem with the Helmand Plan was that the military deviated from it almost immediately and the civilians – despite Reid's best efforts to encourage serious DfID participation – did not show up. There were also many flaws in the detail which deserve to be bared, if only to demonstrate how far 'the plan' was from the reality. As plans do not like manna descend from heaven, but are conceived in men's minds, this is another way of saying that many officials' minds languished a fair and reckonable distance from reality.

First and most obviously, the Helmand Plan was devised without consultation and advice from the people it was supposed to be assisting – the Helmandis themselves. It was a scheme largely devised by Western experts who believed they knew what was good for Helmand. To these experts, Pashtun villagers were essentially Rousseauian *sauvages* awaiting the civilizing light of Western enlightenment to lead them to a better place. In this sense, the Helmand Plan exactly mirrored the Helmand Valley Project which was foisted on the province's farmers, without their consultation, 'for their own good', by foreigners. The second and related flaw was that the Westerners based these well-meaning intentions on frankly very limited knowledge. It was remarkable just how little the British actually knew about the province where they were deploying a 3,000 strong task force. In 16 Air Assault Brigade, a single lieutenant colonel had been tasked to mug up on Helmand. At PJHQ a more comprehensive effort was made under a Brigadier Paul Newton to understand Helmand, which included recruiting a former mujahidin to give advice on Afghan ways. Everyone was aware of the intelligence failures in Iraq and avoiding a repeat of these shortcomings was 'absolutely on the tip of our tongues throughout this whole period'.[222] These efforts, however, proved inadequate. It would

take several years before the claim could be made that the British understood Helmand. To be fair, as General Richards would later point out when quizzed over intelligence failures, ‘there was just no way we could do it’ because no ISAF troops had actually visited large areas of Helmand. British knowledge of Helmand was always, necessarily, going to be very incomplete.[223] British intelligence on Helmand was not poor, as later alleged. What was known was accurate. Unfortunately, this knowledge was desperately thin.

Thirdly, the plan was predicated on imaginary resources and capabilities. In the last years of the Blair premiership, foreign policy increasingly gave the impression that it was being based on phantom divisions and paper organisations. Britain had volunteered to lead on counter-narcotics – the principal reason, it seems, why the British deployed to Helmand in the first place – but Britain had no experience in leading counter-narcotics campaigns. There was not even an equivalent of the American Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), the one organisation that could claim real and global experience in counter-narcotics. Remarkably, the Afghanistan counter-narcotics program was placed in the hands of the FCO and SIS – two organisations with no expertise whatsoever in this field.[224] To be fair to the FCO official leading the program – Michael Ryder – it appears he soon appreciated the venture was foredoomed, but found himself in the uncomfortable position of having to obey senseless political instruction. Neither were counter-narcotic operations included in NATO’s operational plan.[225] This sensitive subject which only the Americans wanted to address seriously through the controversial policy of eradication was relegated to a secondary task, conducted only in support of Afghan counter-narcotics programs, which were minimal and ineffectual. The notion that Britain could effectively lead a counter-narcotics campaign in Afghanistan was hogwash. Over eight years, it appears no individuals in the government departments involved in this charade told their political masters so. This may be viewed as reprehensible and dishonest.

Most critically, Britain had no organisation capable of supporting reconstruction in a hostile environment, or in plain English, a war. Much would be written about the rights and wrongs of reconstruction, and there was certainly mutual ignorance on the part of the military and civil agencies, but these differences and arguments obscured the central fact that DfID gained its modern charter in a froth of end-of-century optimism to promote lofty and idealistic ‘millennium goals’. The organisation was not set up to deal with the practicalities of achieving real goals at the sharp end of war zones. DfID basically disbursed billions of pounds of British taxpayer’s money, largely by transferring it to opaque funds run by multi-laterals like the World Bank. In a triumph of hope over

experience, it then made claims over how this transfer of British taxes was making the world ‘better’ through the meeting of often dubious and in some respects brazenly deceitful targets related to ‘millennium goals’. DfID did not ‘do reconstruction’. To operate effectively, or indeed at all, it needed Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other development experts. In normal circumstances these were more than happy to siphon juicy consultancy fees from DfID. But in 2006 the ‘experts’ were in very short supply in Helmand. As soon as the fighting flared up, they quit the province altogether, along with the nervous DfID staff.

Despite protests to the contrary when later criticised, DfID had always been reluctant to deploy to Helmand. Tootal recalled that the number of civilians deployed to Lashkar Gah could be counted on one hand – this was scandalously inadequate. The organisation had to be pushed and prodded into supporting the military mission eventually through the creation of an entirely new organisation called the Civil Stabilisation Unit when failure could no longer be concealed. From the beginning there was a total mismatch between the vision of a prime minister who staked Britain’s reputation in Helmand and one of the key government departments that was meant to translate that vision into effective policy. At the outset of the Afghan mission, Major General McColl had been given the meaninglessly small sum of £2 million to support reconstruction.[226] When the British task force deployed to Helmand, only about five per cent of British aid to Afghanistan was directed to the province by DfID. By ISAF’s own graphs, Helmand province, the most troubled in Afghanistan, was receiving the second smallest amount of aid money in the entire country.

The claim that ‘DFID works closely with other UK Government departments including the MOD’ was an empty claim.[227] DfID wanted to remain in the relatively congenial world of the Kabul diplomatic circuit, providing funds to support ‘development goals’. The very first page of the organisation’s slick, glossy brochure made this plain. DfiD also sought to build up Afghan central government ‘capacity’ – a laudable and important goal if the Karzai government was ever to stand on its own feet – notwithstanding that rampant corruption was almost certainly draining millions of pounds of British aid money. Living in portakabins in Lashkar Gah, supporting the British Army, was not at the top of DfiD’s agenda in the summer of 2006.

The shortcomings of DfiD’s operation in Helmand would eventually be recognised and spending restrictions imposed by the International Development Act bypassed by placing funds in a Global Conflict Prevention Pool. At the heart of the problem, however, was not

just a lack of funding but attitudes. Eventually, the British would establish a more effective stabilisation strategy, but not before much goodwill had been lost.

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The Gereshk Hospital washing machine incident illustrated this clash of expectations. In no war has the plumbing of a washing machine become a *cause célèbre*. In Helmand, this omission from the history of conflict was rectified. The story had several tellers, each with a different point of view. It seems that on an early visit to the hospital in Gereshk (a patrol which Lieutenant-Colonel Tootal joined) it was noticed that a washing machine in the hospital, donated by USAID, had still not been plumbed. The paratroopers offered to plumb the machine as part of a QIP or Quick Impact Project. To their surprise they were forbidden from plumbing the machine by DfID, on the grounds that this would be to interfere in the Afghan national health system.[228] Among the long and bureaucratic list of criteria propounded by DfID was the principle that the military should not use QIPs to win 'hearts and minds' and nor should the military undertake work that might be undertaken by a civilian actor, in this case the bankrupt Afghan healthcare system.[229] This to the paratroopers was dogma supplanting common sense. Illogically, DfID's guide to QIPs also suggested that one of the areas where the military could help was in the restoration of utilities, such as sanitation.

The saga over the Gereshk Hospital washing machine did have other sides. Reportedly, the staff had previously refused offers of help for a variety of reasons.[230] Nevertheless, it was incidents like this that divided the military and civil agencies when they should have been working in tandem. It also raised the question whether DfID's charter was realistic in a war zone. Another DfID principle was that the military should only offer medical assistance 'as a last resort', and when the person's wellbeing was 'severely at risk'. Over the course of the war British military doctors and nurses treated hundreds of Afghans who turned up at the patrol bases with some or other ailment, serious or not. A fifth of all patients that passed through Bastion Hospital were Afghans, the majority children. DfID's strictures, in this case, were ignored. Defence doctors and nurses were well aware of the ethical and practical pitfalls associated with providing medical services to an indigenous population – it was a subject greatly debated and written about within military medical services – these doctors did not need dogmatic advice from another government department conspicuous mostly by its absence in Helmand. It was perhaps a fitting comment on the whole mixed-up business that the infamous washing machine remained un-plumbed when 3 Para finally left the province (incidentally, it took five years to agree a

contract to restore the dilapidated Gereshk Hospital, so perhaps Tootal's hopes for a quick-win with the washing machine were somewhat misplaced).

There was an argument then that the central plank of Britain's involvement in Helmand was rotten before the mission even started. What cannot be hidden is that the British knew this, or should have known this. DfID's record in Iraq was already causing serious disquiet. DfID staff did not co-locate with the Army HQ, increasing friction and complicating cooperation. When the situation in Basra deteriorated in 2005-06 the army launched Operation Sinbad to re-establish security in the city. DfID refused to support this operation (American CERPs funds were used to support reconstruction).[231] Instead, citing a dangerous working environment, DfID moved base to the more pleasant surroundings of Kuwait. It seemed to accord with the national zeitgeist that a government department was prepared to undermine British foreign policy on the grounds of health and safety. The British so-called 'comprehensive approach' was an unfolding disaster in Iraq, but either Whitehall was simply brushing this under a very thick carpet, or the true state of affairs in southern Iraq were not being honestly communicated to ministers. The same pattern would be repeated in Helmand. Nothing, it seems, was being learned.

Fourthly, the plan was apparently based on an inappropriate and hubristic appeal to the Malayan Emergency, the so-called 'ink spot strategy'. Linked to this was the other shibboleth of counter-insurgent theorists, 'winning hearts and minds'. Foreign Minister Kim Howells' observation on the matter is difficult to improve: 'I remember a very distinguished and clever general [presumably General Richards] explaining to me on a big sheet of paper how they would have an ink blot approach to Helmand province. They would have an ink blot here and an ink blot there and they would gradually join them up and then control the whole area. It was completely bonkers'.[232]

It *was* bonkers, for two reasons. First, because the British did not do 'ink spots' in Malaya; they did old-fashioned population control. And second, 'ink spots' were not a British idea anyway. The term *tache de l'huile* was coined by the French Marshal Hubert Lyautey, a character who viewed himself as the Louis XIV of the colonies and who was determined to spread conservative, Catholic French values in expanding 'oil spots' – or counter-insurgency as evangelism. In Helmand, as MP Adam Holloway later quipped, there was more a 'violently flicked ink splatter'.[233]

An eloquent and anonymous author of the leaked 'Pentagon Papers' from the Vietnam War put his finger on the real problem with ink spots and abstract war theories:

‘The oil blot theory, like all abstract analogies, emphasizes the similarity between phenomena and ignores the differences. The important similarity of the pacification problem to the oil blot is the expressed goal of progressively extending the secure zone until it embraces the entire country. Unlike a blank piece of paper, however, the environment in which pacification must take place is neither neutral nor passive; and unlike the oil blot, the pacification forces are not impervious. Moreover, implicit in the theory is the notion that the secure area, like the oil blot, will expand in all directions simultaneously, at roughly the same speed, and that expansion is irreversible and irrevocable. Further, the analogy fails to take into account unique problems of terrain or variances in government and insurgent strength in different areas. One need not belabor the point; the concept is fine as a theory, but not as a program design.’[234]

The British were proud of their counter-insurgency campaign in Malaya and it was frequently contrasted with America’s poor experience in Vietnam, but this false nostalgia for British know-how in counter-insurgency wars contained a trap. Few British Army officers actually had more than the sketchiest knowledge of the Malayan Emergency anyway. How many, for example, had ever bothered to read Chin Peng’s *My Side of History*, to gain a better understanding of the conflict from the enemy’s perspective, let alone British histories? The truthful answer was probably not one. Better models (and warnings) would have been gleaned by examining Britain’s unhappy experiences in Palestine or the Aden, as well as the successful campaign in the Dhofar, but not the Malayan Emergency. The differences between Malaya and Helmand were so manifest that it is difficult to understand what the promoters of the ‘ink spot strategy’ were seeing.

Malaya was a prosperous and emerging colony, albeit suffering a post-war economic downturn which acted as a catalyst for the insurgency. Helmand was a semi-medieval backwater blighted by almost three decades of war that had reduced the majority of the population to grinding poverty. Britain had thirteen battalions in Malaya and would later raise troop levels to create a 40,000 strong force. Just one battalion was being sent to Helmand. Brigadier Butler would later testify to the acute concerns provoked by the manning cap imposed on the first Operation Herrick in evidence to the Select Defence Committee:

‘I actually said to the Chief of the Defence Staff at the time-in about May-when he asked whether another battalion would make a difference, I said rather quickly, “No you’ll need a Division here,” and I remember saying, “but even with a Division we’re not going to conquer the Afghans by strength alone.” He then said, “You’re not getting a division,

Ed, what about another battalion?"'

It may have amused Butler to know that the Soviets had calculated that over thirty divisions would be required to control Afghanistan.

The ethnic Han Chinese who supported the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) were in a minority. In Helmand, ethnic Pashtuns were in an overwhelming majority. The Briggs Plan, which was the capstone of the British strategy, involved the mass ethnic cleansing of almost 400,000 Chinese Malays, by forcibly removing them into the so-called 'New Villages'. By this means it was hoped the insurgent would be separated from the population. The French would later copy this strategy, relocating as many as one million Algerians, to create *zones interdites*, with much less success.

Separating the insurgent from the population became a mantra in Afghanistan, reinforced by General McChrystal after he assumed command of ISAF operations in 2009. But Afghanistan at the beginning of the 21st century was very far from the post-world war years when Western powers could simply shift entire demographic groups to suit their needs. More pertinently, in Helmand, the insurgents *were* the population. One of the more revealing aspects of the war was the manner in which villagers would deny all knowledge of Taliban, but would subsequently appear at the gates of British patrol bases when an insurgent had been killed to collect the body. In Helmand, the British provoked a rural insurrection, something that was never fully recognised or admitted to. In Malaya the MNLA cause was never popular. Helmand polls routinely showed that about one quarter of the population sympathised with or supported the Taliban. As late as 2010, polls were still showing that Helmandis preferred the Taliban to ISAF.[235] About half of the population simply wanted the British to leave.

'Hearts and minds' in Malaya was a political slogan, not a military strategy – it was an appeal to Malays to reconcile. Indeed, General Sir Gerard Templer regarded the phrase, which he coined, 'nauseating'. The ill-tempered general was quite clear that the military strategy was to kill CTs (Chinese Terrorists), not win friends. This instruction was expressed with characteristic bluntness on the first page of the army's counter-insurgency manual. Over the years the mythologised phrase became the foundation stone of counter-insurgency theories despite overwhelming evidence that the chances of soldiers winning 'hearts and minds' were pretty slim even in the best of circumstances. One only had to point to Northern Ireland where the British Army spent thirty years hated by Catholic enclaves in Londonderry and Belfast, no matter what it did or how it behaved. In Malaya, the British themselves eventually conceded that trying to win Chinese 'hearts and minds'

was a pointless endeavour and gave up.

The MNLA had no sanctuary or international supporters. Crucially, the MNLA believed that the Chinese intervention in Korea would be followed by intervention in Malaya. As Graham Green observed writing for *Life* Magazine: 'News of a Western defeat in Korea is worth a hundred successful ambushes to these men.'[236] When it became clear that China would not become embroiled in Malaya MNLA morale collapsed. The Taliban by contrast had strategic depth in Pakistan and numerous backers wishing to see a failed ISAF mission. The Malayan Emergency had an obvious and uncontroversial political solution. The British had promised independence. Once this independence was granted in 1957, the rationale for the insurgency largely withered. Afghanistan had no easy political solution despite naïve, Western attempts to impose some form of central government and democracy on a patchwork of competing ethnic groups.

Lastly – and this was a point that was seldom if ever made when the Malayan Emergency was waved at the Americans as a model for counter-insurgency – the British essentially bought time for their own honourable withdrawal. On departure, the British hero of the hour, Templer, growled at the press: 'I'll shoot the bastard who says the insurgency is over' - such was the difference between the old general and an obsession with 'positive messaging' that would accompany the British withdrawal from Helmand. After the British left Malaya the insurgency did resume and would last for a further twenty-two years. This is exactly what Graham Greene predicted would happen.

There was another profound flaw with 'the plan'. Whose plan, exactly, was the brigade supposed to be following? At any one stage there were as many as six plans, according to Butler.[237] ISAF promulgated an Afghan-wide strategic plan. At PJHQ, a second strategic plan was drafted – the plan, in fact, which 16 Air Assault Brigade was supposed to be adhering to – the British plan for the Stage 3 expansion of the ISAF mission (known as the 'Prelim Ops Plan'). This was the plan that Reid understood and endorsed. But the brigade was subordinated to a southern Afghan regional command with its own general and staff, and this headquarters also promulgated an operational plan, which it expected the British Task Force to follow. And lastly there was the campaign plan drafted by the headquarters staff of the brigade itself. This plan, ultimately, was the plan which the brigade seemed to cling to, mainly, it seems, because it was understood by its authors.[238] One civilian observer could not fail to notice that some of the brigade staff had clearly not even bothered to read the Helmand Plan.[239] Some voices, like that of Mark Etherington, a civilian development advisor, suggested less haste but these were seemingly over-ruled by

a military team anxious to meet pre-determined timelines.

This competition of plans – mixing strategic, operational and tactical concepts in dubious ways - was ultimately disastrous for the British. They all ended up in a trash can anyway. What was intended as an ISAF mission was almost immediately entangled with the quite separate American-led Operation Enduring Freedom. The separate, overlapping plans were trumped by Major General Benjamin Freakley, the US commander in south-west Afghanistan, with his own plan for the British task force. In the summer of 2006, in Helmand, the charge that the British had become 'America's poodle' was well-founded.

Actually implementing the plan – such as it was understood – with the geographical dispersion of the various headquarters was another matter. The battlegroup HQ and logistic staff deployed to Camp Bastion, a newly built camp in the middle of the desert, west of the capital Lashkar Gah. The unemployed PRT remained based at the capital. The brigade HQ and aircraft were parked 125 kilometres away in Kandahar; and the brigade commander, Ed Butler, initially ended up 500 kilometres away in Kabul. The fundamental rule of unity of staffs – the 'joint warfare' which countless staff college students had dutifully imbibed on their way to senior appointments in the armed forces had been thoroughly broken. Not since the dark days of the western desert campaigns– before Montgomery drove a sword through the Gordian knot of British incompetence – could such a chaotic and divided headquarters set-up be found. Once dropped, the immovable weight of the respective headquarters could barely be lifted again (although the Royal Marines would decisively move the brigade HQ to Lashkar Gah in October). These headquarters inevitably expanded, doubling and tripling the manpower needed to man the organisations.

Lieutenant Colonel Tootal's chain of command within this set-up was extremely confused. Because a Canadian brigadier, David Fraser, already commanded ISAF troops in south-west Afghanistan, it was deemed inappropriate that Ed Butler should exercise direct command, which is why the unlucky Butler initially ended up in Kabul. But because it was also judged inappropriate that Brigadier Fraser should be giving commands directly to the British commanding officer in Helmand, a deputy, Colonel Charlie Knaggs, was posted to the Lashkar Gah PRT. In practice this meant that Fraser had to pass his orders through Knaggs, who would then transmit them to Tootal, who would then have the right to confer with Butler, if there were doubts over the task given to the British. Butler in turn had to juggle the conflicting demands of his own superiors; Freakley, the American general; an anxious British ambassador and FCO; and a PJHQ with limited understanding

of the situation in Helmand.

This shambolic command structure was not the only problem Lieutenant Colonel Tootal would face. He also had to contend with special force units operating in an uncoordinated fashion in his backyard. This failure to coordinate special force operations with the operations of the wider army was not accidental but rather an accident waiting to happen. The diffident attitude of the special force community towards the 'green army' had a long history. In the modern period the notion that special force units were really quite separate from the rest of the army was reinforced by Prime Minister Thatcher who championed 22 SAS following the Iranian Embassy siege. Her love affair with the regiment cooled after a bungled operation in Gibraltar severely embarrassed her government (which did no harm to the somewhat eccentric public schoolboy officer who commanded the operation – he eventually retired from the army with the rank of brigadier). But the sense that special forces answered to their own chain of command, and ultimately to 10 Downing Street, rather than to the regular chain of command, remained. In the case of US special force units the problem was even worse. Lieutenant Colonel Tootal had no idea what units were working in Helmand and nor was he informed of impending operations. This would remain a constant source of friction not only in Helmand but throughout the ISAF regional commands. Even before the British arrived, a poll revealed that 70 per cent of Helmandis judged that ISAF troops were conducting 'improper actions' and 38 per cent did not want Western troops in the province.[240] This was the legacy of American special force operations that Lieutenant Colonel Tootal was about to inherit. In later years, more than one ISAF PRT would find months of patient cultivation of 'hearts and minds' undermined by a special force raid on their patch that went wrong and that resulted in the deaths of innocent civilians. In Helmand, a British special force mission known as Operation Malaya was already underway but co-ordination would remain a problem and a significant period of time would pass before the British task force in Helmand could claim to be fighting an integrated war.[241]

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At the beginning of May, Britain's own Lieutenant General David Richards would be taking over the command of ISAF IX. This intelligent and urbane officer who would rise to become the Chief of the Defence Staff had clear ideas on the purpose of the mission, but he too would find himself thwarted by events and timings. Crucially, ISAF would not take over southern Afghanistan from American forces until 31 July. Over the first three months of the deployment, the British mission, effectively commanded by the American

Ben Freakley, would unravel.

It is unquestionable that Richards displayed a certain self-regard. This would be exposed in some excruciatingly embarrassing passages in his later autobiography *Taking Command*. It was also the case that he could manifest condescension towards highly erudite people who ultimately were proved right, and he wrong. A diary entry in which he described the columnist Simon Jenkins as incapable of seeing the strategic woods for the trees was eyebrow-raising.[242] His descriptions of the chaps on the other side of the hill could also be surprising. In one paragraph he hilariously described a Taliban commander as a very bad man. This would have been an appropriate form of words if he were trying to explain the Afghanistan War to a ten year old but it begged questions whether ISAF properly understood why the naughty Pashtun and his friends were losing their lives fighting Western soldiers on their lands. It was not because they were 'bad'. Nonetheless, these foibles aside, here was a general with some sound ideas and convictions, which to date had been short in ISAF.

Richard's vision *was* highly enlightened but it was never championed or resourced. Five priorities were proposed to restore stability to Afghanistan: reconstruction, development, governance, relations with Pakistan, and lastly security, or fighting. In Richard's view, ISAF's mission was to deepen Afghan governance, allowing reconstruction to take place and importantly allowing the Afghan security forces to take the lead. To achieve this aim he promoted the concept of an integrated Policy Action Group, or PAG, and championed the creation of ADZs, or Afghan Development Zones, ill-advisedly using Helmand as an example. Securing the population, the central plank of the later McChrystal doctrine, was also General Richard's key idea:

'My Guiding Intent is for all those in Afghanistan who are opposed to the use of violence for political ends to actively unite their efforts in order to secure the Afghan population as a whole from hardcore Taliban and other insurgents. We must give the former the incentive, the means, the resolve and the courage to stand up to the latter.'[243]

In offering this vision, Richards was acutely aware that time was not on ISAF's side. Too many expectations had been raised that had not been fulfilled. The insurgency had grown stronger because of Western neglect, not because the Afghan people welcomed a resurgent Taliban. Richards was also keen to work with and not against the grain of Afghan culture. 'We should seek to re-invigorate valued and trusted traditional forms of influence and authority', he argued, 'Let local people decide on specific priorities and feel a sense of project ownership…we must listen much more closely to…the people and be

less inclined to apply western precepts to a socio-economy that has its own dynamic and requirements'.[244] Unsurprisingly, for a man conscious of the importance of this subtle approach he found that pan-government strategic integration was 'woeful' (echoing John Reid's private fears over DfID) and resolved that the shortcomings should be addressed as a matter of urgency.[245]

Richards also recognised the importance of Pakistan long before the term 'Af-Pak' was coined. He met with President Musharraf (the two generals seemed to have liked each other) and he championed regular meetings with Pakistani counterparts through a series of working groups and committees. He promoted the creation of a Joint Intelligence Operations Centre in Kabul that included six Pakistani intelligence officers working alongside ISAF and Afghan counterparts. All this was highly free-thinking at a time when ISAF and in particular Operation Enduring Freedom was effectively ignoring the importance of the southern neighbour.

Significantly, Richards foresaw a *mobile* role for ISAF, not a ground-holding role. In a valedictory presentation as ISAF IX Commander entitled *Theatre Command*, Richards included a slide sub-titled 'Restoring People's Confidence' which showed governance, development and security bubbles all within a larger ANSF bubble. *Outside* this bubble were smaller 'ISAF/ANA Manoeuvre' bubbles protecting the inner Afghan-led nucleus. Whether or not this was a realistic vision, it was a world-away from the course of action Task Force Helmand would follow.

Richards was not unrealistic about the problems facing ISAF, which were several. The alliance suffered from a key shortage of troops in critical areas. Eleven nations remained resolutely outside the ISAF command arrangements. National caveats and restrictions were having a significant impact on ISAF's ability to fight a coherent war. Media and messaging were poor. Rules of Engagement were confusing and conflicting. Tactical victories were not being deepened by permanent security presence of benefit to the local population. A lack of helicopters was proving the 'key constraint'. All these would have to be addressed, but time, in particular his time, was far too short. General Richards was the closest the British came to producing a modern Gerald Templer. In the modern army, with its six monthly rotating posts, he never got his chance.

Ironically, some in the Pentagon envisaged exactly this role for Richards. Following a visit by Donald Rumsfeld, the idea was mooted that the newly-appointed Commander ISAF might serve an eighteen month tour. Typically, the British general interpreted this in the most flattering light as an endorsement of his sound leadership. It was and Rumsfeld had

been impressed, but for different reasons. For American policy makers the Taliban had been ‘defeated’. The trick now was to persuade a British government to act as America’s charlady across Afghanistan. In Richards, Rumsfeld saw a suitable candidate to don the apron and rubber gloves. This position would be abruptly reversed within a few months with the controversial ‘Musa Qaleh deal’ that would raise perennial fears over a perceived British lack of fight.

Lieutenant Colonel Tootal also had a clear idea of the mission. In a staged media interview, he explained the forthcoming British deployment in terms of force protection for reconstruction teams that would rebuild roads, schools and hospitals, as well as providing security to the Afghan National Army that would tackle the narco-trade.’[246] He could barely have guessed his battlegroup would achieve none of these aims.

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This was the public face of the mission. In private, Tootal held a quite different view. In December 2005, he had undertaken a reconnaissance to Zabul, rather than Helmand, where he was hosted by an American unit. The reason for this odd choice of location remains obscure. The visit seemed to make a strong impression on him. Tootal came away with a sense that Western forces were engaged in an outright war with the Taliban, not a Peace Support Operation (PSO), the official description of the forthcoming British mission. In his memoirs, Tootal would not mention this trip. This recce influenced the training undertaken by 3 Para in Oman, which focused on fighting as much as winning ‘hearts and minds’, and led to a list of demands for additional equipment. A photograph published to accompany the news article showed a Private Bennis squatting on a bergen reading a book entitled *Hunting Al Qaeda*. At least this paratrooper seemed to share his commanding officer’s private view of the purpose of Operation Herrick 4.

The 3 Para battlegroup that deployed to Helmand was much larger than a normal peacetime battalion, but it would nonetheless be swallowed like a desert caravan in Helmand’s never-ending space. It was perhaps symptomatic of a peacetime army that just three members of the battalion, all Falklands veterans, had experience of real war.[247] The total British deployment numbered about 3,150 troops.[248] One third (1,180) fell under the 3 Para battlegroup. This compensated, at least at the beginning, for the fact that 3 Para’s establishment strength of 645 men had been financially capped at 552, a commitment which it was unable to meet anyway. The battalion actually deployed fifty paratroopers short of this capped figure. When another 100 odd paratroopers were deleted from the

order of battle, because of Rest and Recuperation (R&R) or other reasons, Tootal really only had around 400 infantry to meet all the commitments thrown at him in Helmand (in an area of roughly 60,000 square kilometres, or yielding one soldier for every 150 square kilometres). It was a hopelessly inadequate number, even if the operation had unfolded relatively peacefully.

There was a certain irony to this as critics later made two simultaneous and contradictory charges: first that the army had deliberately argued for a strong force, to get into a fight; and secondly, that the MOD had hopelessly under-estimated the task, and sent a weak force.

The parachute battalion proper consisted of three 'line companies'; an 'ISTAR company' (a pompous military acronym for a reconnaissance company); and a support company which included heavy weapons like mortars. As the battalion was under-manned, it was at first reinforced by a platoon of Royal Irish and a second platoon of Territorial Army paratroopers. By the end of the tour the battlegroup would almost double in number with attached infantry companies from other regiments, a policy of 'augmentation' that disguised the over-stretch the army was suffering. These included further companies from the 1 Royal Irish Regiment, 2 Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, 2 Royal Gurkha Rifles and an Estonian Mechanised Infantry Platoon. The 3 Para battlegroup would become an ad hoc unit in every sense of the word.

The battlegroup's armoured reconnaissance was provided by D Squadron of the Household Cavalry Regiment (HCR), veterans of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Unfortunately, the troopers and their precious Scimitar reconnaissance vehicles would not arrive in Helmand until July. Even following their deployment, in Brigadier Butler's judgement, the task force was suffering a 45 per cent shortfall in vehicles, of all types.[249] Artillery support was provided by 105mm light guns manned by I Battery of 7 Royal Horse Artillery (7 RHA). 18 Troop, an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) troop completed the complement of gunners. Unable to fly the nearly useless existing British UAV in the army's inventory (Phoenix), the gunners resorted to flying the American Desert Hawk mini-UAV, a hand-thrown aircraft with limited range and endurance. Signals support was provided by 216 Signal Squadron specially reinforced by invaluable LEWTs, or Light Electronic Warfare Teams. Engineers were sourced from 23 Regiment Royal Engineers that deployed one of its combat field squadrons (51 Squadron).

On paper this appeared to be a well balanced formation but there were serious deficiencies that would become glaring gaps as the operation unfolded. Most notably there

were insufficient helicopters to support the force. 18 and 27 Squadrons RAF were deploying six CH-47 Chinooks. In practice, this meant that on a routine basis perhaps half this number was actually available because of financial caps on flying hours, maintenance schedules and the need to provide a Chinook to support casualty evacuation. At most, the RAF could surge four aircraft, or enough to lift one company and its equipment. 656 Squadron from 9 Regiment Army Air Corps completed the Joint Helicopter Force with the first operational deployment of eight WAH-64D Apache. These magnificent machines would play a key role in the Helmand campaign, but they also represented an asset that had to be husbanded carefully because of financial caps on flying hours. Butler's warnings over the unrealistic and miserly restrictions on flying hours came to pass within one month of arriving in Helmand:

'By May …We were some 20% over our hours for support helicopter-Chinooks-we had six of them. We were already 11% over on our attack helicopter hours.'[250]

In fact, this was inevitable. The operational budget for the Apache had been capped at a totally inadequate £2 million. By the following summer it leapt to £34 million (the Chinook operational budget similarly jumped from £18 million to £77 million).[251] These numbers inescapably show that the handful of helicopters sent to Helmand in 2006 had been sent 'on the cheap', and did not enjoy the necessary budgeted flying hours to properly support the mission. The responsibility for this lay squarely on the Treasury.

The first company – A Company – arrived at the newly built Camp Bastion – twenty kilometres west of the provincial capital Lashkar Gah on 15 April. The brigade officially assumed command of its new AO (Area of Operations) on 1 May 2006. With only one under-manned battalion of paratroopers to cover an area the size of southern England, Lieutenant Colonel Tootal's options were, to say the least, limited. Camp Bastion was the only sizeable camp with a logistic infrastructure in place that could support the extended, anticipated operations. The camp also benefited from albeit rudimentary communications that would prove vital. With members of the Task Force HQ decamped in the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, Tootal really had no option but to establish his battalion HQ in the logistics base, but this was not ideal. It would mean that he would be isolated from his line companies, fifty kilometres to the east and north, located in forward operating bases or FOBs. Such was the difficulty of the terrain and the lack of a road infrastructure these distances typically took two or more days to cover. Breakdowns were frequent and convoys got lost. The British only had a sketchy knowledge of the ground: the state of fords, or the trafficability of wadis, which would have to be discovered by trial and error.

The companies would be very isolated indeed.

For the remainder of the month and all through May, the remainder of the battlegroup began to arrive in packets. This was highly unsatisfactory and Tootal chafed at the manner in which his troops were being delivered to the theatre of operations. In the case of the last company to deploy, all the hard training and acclimatization that had been conducted in Oman was undone getting fat again in England. It seemed amazing the RAF lacked the resources to fly 1,000 men and their equipment to Afghanistan in anything less than a month – the USAF had flown an entire airborne division lock, stock and barrel to Kuwait in one week, in Operation Iraqi Freedom. It all seemed to reflect badly on the decline of the RAF's strategic lift capability and it provoked frustration amongst Americans still based in Helmand who were waiting to quit the province. The situation would not have improved two years later with commanding officers complaining about arriving at Camp Bastion or Kandahar at 'half cock'.

American and Canadian engineers expanding the ISAF mission from Kandahar had already built two forward operating bases in Helmand, FOB Price immediately west of Gereshk (built in the summer of 2002), and FOB Robinson. A third FOB – Juno – was being used by special force units, although the British special force contingent initially parked itself in FOB Price. Keen to make an impression, A Company was deployed to FOB Price within two weeks of arriving in Helmand and conducted its first familiarisation patrol in the town on 29 April, coincidentally the anniversary of the fall of the Taliban. The main recollection of this first British patrol in Helmand province was the debilitating heat.[252] The town itself appeared peaceful if wary of the newcomers.

The other ISAF base, FOB Robinson, built five kilometres to the south of Sangin, was a more austere location. The immediate surrounding desert resembled a moonscape with craters where mortar bombs had fallen short. The original, compact, square-shaped camp had been extended so that FOB Robinson now resembled a lop-sided trapezoid pointing north towards Sangin. Gun pits and the corrugated roofs of pre-fabricated buildings soon began to fill its empty spaces. FOB Robinson had been originally intended as a base for the ANA but after a violent confrontation between local tribesmen and the corrupt police, a Canadian infantry company had been despatched to stiffen the base. The Canadians were still holding the line when the British arrived. On 26 April, just one day after the task force activation party arrived at Lashkar Gah, Butler held an impromptu *shura* (meeting) in Sangin such was the level of hostility that this base had already begun to attract from the townspeople.

Having started to lay out his forces, like counters in a game of Risk, what exactly was Lieutenant Colonel Tootal supposed to do next? The vagueness of his all-embracing mission – the 'what' of the mission – hid profound flaws in the 'why' and the 'how' of the mission. His task was to support central government authority (which only existed in the imagination of Kabul-based civilians); and to collaborate in PRT-led reconstruction with local Afghan governmental departments (the PRT was non-functioning and effective local governance in Helmand was also non-existent). It was also intended that 3 Para would take over the training of 1/205 Brigade from the Americans, in reality a paper battalion of demoralised ANA (Afghan National Army) soldiers. In keeping with his judgement that 3 Para had to be ready for anything, Tootal established the single company at Gereshk, and held back the remainder of his battalion as an Operations Company Group, supported by a number of platoon-sized Quick Reaction Forces (QRFs). These eventually formed the multi-layered IRTs (Immediate Reaction Teams), a Helmand Reaction Force, and Regional QRF. At the time, this seemed the wisest option.

The Americans had already built a camp for the ANA – Camp Tombstone, at a cost of $68 million. The funereal association in the name was hard to miss and it was no surprise the Americans were desperate to get away. By the time the British arrived late to take over the job, parts of the camp had already been stripped and sold off by the ANA.[253] The unit was meant to be 1000 strong but a third had deserted. The overwhelming majority were illiterate. Many were ill. Many were short sighted but could not afford to buy spectacles. Few could tell the time. Few cared to train still less fight. They had no kit to speak of and were quick to sell off attractive items in Lashkar Gah.[254] Like their brethren in the police (the ANP) they set up checkpoints to extort money from the locals. 3 Para would never engage in the ANA training mission – a failure that was never explained by any of the Herrick 4 protagonists - and the British only seriously threw themselves into training the Afghan security forces when it became obvious that this was the only viable exit strategy out of the mess of Helmand. Faced with this unsatisfactory panorama, the paratroopers fell back on the old staples of establishing 'presence' in the heart of some distrustful communities that had never seen a British soldier, still less understood why he was there, patrolling and attempting to win 'hearts and minds'.

This vacuum in direction and real purpose could not last long. Two personalities then entered the story that would derail the British mission from its original purpose and uncork the bottle of insurrection. The first was Major General Benjamin Freakley, the commander of Combined Joint Task Force 76 (the umbrella designation for all units

engaged in operations in southern Afghanistan), who simultaneously commanded 10th Mountain Division. General Richards would be taking over CJTF 76 (considered an honour as this would place a British general in command of American servicemen, the first time this had happened since the Second World War), with the establishment of the ISAF Regional Command South-West HQ. But crucially, 3 Para would remain within the command chain of CJTF 76 until 1 August. This was Freakley's swansong before handing over to the British, a matter which seemed to ill-suit his temperament. The American general was a red-blooded Virginian, a scion from heartlands that have produced so many of America's top brass. Freakley believed with religious fervour the peculiarly American mantra that it is an individual duty in life to be the best one can be. This motivation had served him well. He had led combat units at every level of command and he had taken part in both Iraq wars. This was his third war. Commissioned as an infantry officer, he sported parachute wings, air assault wings and a Ranger tab. He had dozens of meritorious and distinguished service medals. Freakley could not be criticised for failing to do his duty.

But what Freakley offered in raw military efficiency he seemed to lack in cultural sensitivity. Freakley was a patriot with an apparent blind spot for anything beyond the shores of continental North America. When interviewed by a reporter shortly after the arrival of the British task force he declared: 'I love our country. I think anybody that's ever been a day or two out of America in any other country [has more] respect for what America stands for…'[255] This hardly suggested a personality interested in engaging in the complexities of central Asian culture, let alone the values of his coalition partners. One of the most emotional moments in his life, he confessed, was seeing a sea of American flags in Iraq.

Freakley's myopic optimism made him an unreliable interpreter of the true evolving situation in Afghanistan. At a Department of Defense teleconference on 16 March – on the eve of the British arrival – the general assured his interlocutors in Washington that there had been 'significant accomplishments' and that 'this nation of Afghanistan clearly is moving forward every day'.[256] In this respect, Freakley was playing the role of the hapless General Paul Harkins in the Vietnam War. Harkins had self-confessedly viewed 'handing out the goodies' as his principal role: just tell Washington what it wants to hear. In one notorious incident, he ordered the removal of red acetates indicating Viet Cong dominated areas from a map, because he knew this would displease a visiting team from Washington. Freakley, unfortunately, too easily slipped into this frame of positive reporting.

With five years' experience in Afghanistan, his understanding of the enemy was certainly accurate – ISAF was facing a mix of criminals, Taliban, some foreign fighters, remnants of al-Qaeda and ex-warlords running lawless militias. But his assessment of the future was fatally complacent: 'I will tell you my sensing right now is the Afghan National Army and the coalition forces have the initiative. We're taking the fight to the enemy'.[257] When asked directly whether he thought the Taliban was getting stronger he replied without equivocation 'no'. Nor did he ask for reinforcements. Pressed whether more troops were required the general boasted to his audience of the capabilities of the newly deployed 'modular force' – a fancy concept the US Army was selling to the Pentagon at the time - adding: 'I think we have the force that we need to defeat this threat' – a sharp contrast to Butler who straightaway realised that ISAF was chronically under-manned for the task.[258]

The general's cultural insularity also affected relations with coalition partners, despite public protestations that he looked forward to working with the British and that the coalition would work well. The reality was that Freakley, as overall commander of ground forces in south-west Afghanistan, would nominally command Brigadier Ed Butler. As a young officer, Freakley had attended a British Army infantry course. Whether or not the experience had left him with a jaundiced view of British Army officers he appeared to quickly develop an antipathy for the old Etonian Ed Butler. Later he would confess that he had felt like punching Butler on one occasion. This Anglo-American friction echoed the infantile spats between Second World War generals that so bedevilled the Allied war effort. In Afghanistan such personality clashes would prove equally damaging. Freakley strongly gave the impression that this was his turf and that he alone understood the game. Furthermore, in his view, the late-arriving and casual British were simply not trying hard enough.

The second character who would walk onto the stage and trip the British was the man anointed by the British themselves to govern Helmand province – 'Engineer Daoud'. The first British incursion into Afghanistan in the mid 19th century had been driven by a desire to replace Afghanistan's ruler with a more compliant, British-approved ruler, a tale told brilliantly in William Dalrymple's *The Return of a King*. In 2005, the British repeated the same folly. The previous governor, Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, an amiable, bushy-bearded Helmandi with oriental eyes, had been deemed unacceptable by the FCO on the grounds that he was corrupt, enjoyed connections with the Taliban, and was heavily involved in the opium poppy trade. That this might be the normal state of affairs in

Helmand seemed to have escaped the judgement of British officials pressing for his dismissal. In a widely reported story, nine tons of opium was found in the governor's offices. Akhundzada claimed this opium had been impounded from dealers. It appears he was telling the truth; the opium had in fact been seized from his close rival Mir Wali.[259] Similar stashes had been confiscated in the past.

However, what followed beggars belief. Seizing their chance, some individuals in the British Embassy colluded in a plot to discredit the Governor by ordering a raid – effectively setting him up - after being informed of the existence of the stash via the American PRT in Lashkar Gah and US Embassy in Kabul.[260] This was playing the Great Game in the most foolish fashion. Britons still have no idea who played the parts of Lord Auckland, McNaughton or Burnes in the modern version of the play. According to Jack Fairweather, the British Ambassador Rosalind Marsden was the motor behind his deposition.[261] Ed Butler has written that SIS was responsible.[262] Whoever was behind this colossally stupid decision, it was the *fons et origo* of all subsequent ills in Helmand and the price was paid with the lives of British soldiers.

'SMA', as he was known, could have been the perfect interlocutor offering the British a back door entrance into the corridors of power in Helmand. He could have been the friendly rascal who introduced the British to all the other villains. Instead he was turned into an enemy and with his dismissal an opportunity was lost. General Richards would later politely hint that he viewed the sacking of 'SMA' as a mistake.[263] President Karzai would also rue in public Akhundzada's dismissal at the promptings of ignorant British officials.

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'SMA' had other virtues. He held no grudge against the British and welcomed the new arrivals. He had co-existed peacefully with the presence of American and Canadian soldiers in his province (the Americans were well aware of his drug dealing, but pragmatically chose to ignore his criminal activities because of his close relation with President Karzai). Helmand elders respected him as nephew of the legendary Mullah Mohammed Nasim Akhundzada, the commander of *Harakat-e-Inqilab-e-Islami*, who led the mujahidin resistance in northern Helmand. The 'Akhundzada' surname had a certain aristocratic pedigree, although a character like Churchill would more darkly observe that it was associated with 'the rapacity and tyranny of a numerous priesthood'.[264]

Sher Akhundzada's status in Helmand was not wholly unchallenged – he survived three

attempts on his life from 2003-2005.[265] His great uncle had fought a bitter inter-tribal war with two local rivals, the Pirzai Abdul Rahman Khan and the Khalozai Abdul Wahid Rais Baghrani. This struggle had the backdrop of a wider fight between the *Harakat* and *Hizb-e Islami* mujahidin, which the former eventually won. The followers of these powerful men remained at large causing periodic mischief. Abdul Rahman Khan would eventually attempt to reassert control in Gereshk, a greatly contested town that changed 'ownership' several times in the post-Taliban period, causing much of the trouble that the Americans and later British would interpret as evidence of a Taliban insurgency. Baghrani would retreat to the far north and similarly find himself labelled a Taliban commander. A case would consequently be made that Akhundzada effectively let the Taliban back into Helmand through his rapacious behaviour and the incitement of inter-tribal fighting.[266] This is perhaps to lay too much blame on one successful tribal leader. They were all at it. Furthermore, it was difficult to separate militias from genuine Taliban (that is, fighters ultimately owing their allegiance to the Quetta Shura and Mullah Omar). Akhundzada's strength may have been fanning grievances and fuelling support for a return to Taliban-rule in marginalised communities, but he was also perfectly capable of defeating challengers, including 'Taliban' gangs, without any help from ISAF.

His rise to power had been entirely due to the family history. When Nasim Akhundzada was assassinated in 1992 his two brothers, Mullah Mohammed Rasool and Mullah Abdul Ghaffar took over the clan business, which by now had become most of the narco-state of Helmand. Rasool in turn became governor of Helmand until he was ousted by the Taliban in 1994. It was this brief tenure that invested legitimacy in Sher Akhundzada's claim to the governorship of Helmand when the Taliban regime later collapsed. His position was subsequently cemented by marriages: the two sisters of a prominent tribal leader Arif Noorzai married Ahmed Wali Karzai (the president's brother) and Sher Mohammed Akhundzada.

In 1988 the elder Mullah Akhundzada cut opium cultivation in Helmand following promises of American aid. The US Congress then blocked the aid on the grounds that Akhundzada was a drug trafficker. Some evidence suggests he never truly reduced poppy cultivation as his approach to the US Embassy was made after the planting season, by which time Helmand's farmers had already made their choices.[267] The luckless Akhundzada, who had survived the Soviets, was subsequently assassinated, possibly by out-of-pocket drug traffickers who blamed him for the broken deal, or more probably by the rival ex-mujahidin Hekmatyar. In 2002, his nephew tried again. Opium poppy

cultivation in Helmand reportedly dropped by about 50 per cent, more than the British and Americans would ever achieve with the expenditure of billions of dollars in failed counter-narcotics initiatives.[268] Again, the West failed to deliver on its aid promises and Helmand farmers returned to growing the opium poppy on a mass scale. It had only taken the word of mouth of an Akhundzada to curb opium poppy cultivation but the FCO seemed uninterested in this powerful and free weapon.

His dismissal had a certain comedic quality. The Akhundzadas could no more be marginalised in Helmand, than MacDonalds in Scotland. He re-appeared in the Upper Chamber of the Afghan parliament and his brother, Amir Mohammed, took over as deputy in Helmand. The British were made to look ridiculous. To add insult to injury, Sher Mohammad Akhunzada maintained a private militia; a normal practice for a powerful local leader. One British newspaper later suggested that as many as 3,000 fighters had answered to the governor.[269] These fighters were reportedly being paid $200 per month by the Finance Ministry in Kabul, or ultimately a British tax payer whose pennies were being redistributed by DfID to pay for 'capacity building'.[270] The British may have dismissed him, but it was not unlikely they had been paying for his private army.

It was probably worse than this. With the loss of the governorship, it appears that a proportion of Akhundzada's militia decided to switch allegiances and fight for the 'Taliban'. Sher Mohammed Akhundzada naturally maintained relations with his former commanders, now freelance 'Taliban', thus ensuring that he kept a foot in both camps.[271] The British could have had several hundred, gun-toting Afghans on their side, eager to have a crack at anti-government militias, for a fee. Instead, they were turned into enemies. The British-appointed Engineer Daoud had no fighters. It was hardly surprising that Helmand's elders turned their noses at this toothless, British-appointed governor.

Mohammed Daoud fitted a naïve FCO view of a suitable governor for Helmand province. Akhunzada was a turban-wearing, illiterate provincial who had never travelled. Daoud by contrast was a suit-and-tie wearing Westernized Afghan with impressive qualifications and a career in international organisations. In exile in Quetta, he had been President Karzai's neighbour (which gave the appointment a whiff of nepotism). The flaw was not in the choice of these two contrasting candidates but in the character of the British diplomatic service. The political officer of the British Empire, a man who spent years immersed in the culture of his adopted country, who learnt the language, (probably picking up a native mistress along the way), and who felt entirely comfortable supping with the devil, had vanished. As Rory Stewart, a former diplomat himself, pointed out in *Can*

Interventions Work - a highly intelligent critique of Western interventions co-authored with the American Gerald Knaus - as late as 2009 the FCO was arguing there was no need for its staff to even learn Pashto. The army in the meantime was valiantly teaching basic Pashto to its semi-literate, twenty year old soldiers.

The imperial political officer would not have set at the top of his to-do list: 'do good', or 'spread Western values'. His modern successor was a six weeks on, two weeks off, tick-box, bureaucrat with poor understanding of the local culture (the notion that a diplomat deserved two weeks leave in Blighty after just a few weeks in country would have quite astounded the 'Politicals' who were used to spending years in isolated posts). Service to your country had long been replaced by self-service and an obsession with allowances, expenses and entitlements. The gap between the modern FCO official and the culture he or she was meant to be interacting with was huge: the award-winning *Times* reporter Christina Lamb recalled watching an FCO and DfID team showing bemused elders in Gereshk a BBC David Attenborough nature program, for what purpose can only be guessed.[272] Daoud would have been viewed with suspicion as a 'white Afghan' by a 19th century India hand (characters like Sir Robert Warburton, who served for many years as assistant commissioner in Peshawar, and who was the son of an Anglo-Irish father and Afghan mother). The old India hand would have sniffed about for the real power-broker, drunk tea with him, and not hesitated to hug his interlocutor, however unpleasant kissing the cheeks of foul-breathed, bearded bigot. The modern British diplomat, by contrast, could only be comfortable with his Afghan mirror image, educated, Westernized and English speaking. Out went the yokel and in came the technocrat.

Daoud was appointed as the new governor, at the request of the British government, on the grounds that he was honest. This may have been true but honesty was an exceedingly volatile currency in Afghan politics. President Karzai's own family was rumoured to be implicated in the narcotics industry. Afghan members of parliament included an unsavoury mix of warlords, criminals, drug barons and a known paedophile. Kim Howells memorably quipped in an answer to a parliamentary question on corruption in Afghanistan:

'This is not Surrey; it is Afghanistan, and it is a pretty rough neighbourhood. To say that we can do nothing there until we have proved that every single provincial governor is as pure as the driven snow is to be on the road to nowhere.'[273]

Nor could it be said that the engineer governor was entirely straight with the facts. His claims over poppy eradication efforts (which reportedly drained $175 million nation-wide

in 2006) were exaggerated.[274] Daoud was not a bad man - indeed he was a competent administrator - he was just the wrong man, and he would in the end be let down by the British. In May 2006 he was also an uncertain and nervous man. His appointment was the first big blunder committed by the British in Helmand province.

The dismissal of Akhundzada was badly received. In Daoud's first shura held in the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah he got a rough reception. What better way, then, to make an impression than to flash heavily armed foreign soldiers in the faces of the local elders who had snubbed him? The opportunity to use the British in this way would come soon and it showed up Daoud at his flighty worst. Daoud would always contest that he pushed the British into acting in precipitate ways but in Butler's recollection it was precisely the newly-appointed governor who most strongly peddled the spectre of a Taliban army over-running Helmand:

'If the black flag of Mullah Omar flies over any of the district centres, you may as well go home because we'll have lost our authority to govern in Helmand, and if we lose our authority to govern and our ability to govern, then that will threaten the south. Kandahar will be next. We'll lose the south before you've even started. What are you going to do about it?'[275]

Daoud's nervousness was transmitted to the FCO who had 'equities' in the new man and this in turn was pushed back onto the newly arrived task force who were urged to act.[276] It was during this build-up phase, as 3 Para were arriving in Helmand that reports of increased violence began to raise tensions. With the arrival of spring, the hibernating Taliban appeared to be returning to the fray – or were they?

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The town of Baghran in the far north was reportedly in Taliban hands. This proved to be an exaggeration; there was no meaningful governance in the north at all, and there never would be. ISAF would just give up on northern Helmand. The tribes were managing their own affairs – and feuds - as they had always done. What they did not want was corrupt rule, and labelling opposition to corrupt rule as 'Taliban' was crass. In Baghran the squabble was, as ever, between Rais Baghrani, the leader of the Khalozai clan, and the Akhundzadas who dominated the Hassanzai branch. Baghrani had opportunistically pinned his colours to the Taliban flag to oust Akhundzada. To escape the Taliban association, he then reconciled in 2005 but the feud with Akhundzada went on. Rather than recognize this for what it was – an inter-tribal dispute mostly over control of the

opium trade – Baghrani was idiotically re-labelled ‘Taliban’, by the Americans, thereby guaranteeing the implacable hostility of the northern Helmand tribes for the rest of the war. A British tribal brief, by contrast, would describe him as ‘a diminutive, soft-spoken man, who has more the air of a religious leader than a wanted terrorist’.[277] The Pirzai clan who allied themselves with Baghrani to resist the Akhundzada hegemony, was also dumped in the same Taliban bucket. This clan was led by a man called Mullah Salaam, the ex-Taliban governor of Kajaki, who would rise to notorious prominence the following winter.

The key questions – which the British were barely in a position to answer – were: did this reported increase in insurgent activity really amount to anything, and why was it happening? Helmandis interviewed by the Territorial Army officer Michael Martin for his magisterial study *War on its Head* were quick to blame the ISI.[278] Whereas it is almost certainly true that the ISI continued to intrigue in Helmand, the pattern and type of incidents did not suggest a Pakistani agenda, but rather tribal disputes over power, land and drugs. Helmandis reflexively blamed Pakistanis, or ‘the Punjabis’ as if all their ills were caused by a giant conspiracy, in much the same way that popular Arab opinion blamed American and Zionist plots. Throughout the war, patrolling British soldiers would be variously assured that ‘Pakistanis’ were to blame for attacks, when they knew full well that locals were responsible.

The evidence for widespread Pakistani involvement is just not strong. Thanks to the public release of the Wikileaks *Afghan War Logs*, it is possible to trace all the Significant Actions (SIGACTS) in south-west Afghanistan, but only from 2004, which coincidentally and fortunately, is when the violence began to increase.[279] From these records it was apparent that Kandahar – the former Taliban capital - had never been satisfactorily pacified. Random shootings and bombings were virtually weekly occurrences even by 2004. This violence was driven by the triad of inter-tribal conflicts, the Taliban, and in this case, the ISI. A clear pattern of violence could be discerned from Spin Boldak on the border, north to Kandahar, west into the Arghandab, and north-west into Uruzgan. The clearest evidence of an insurgent revival was attacks on NGOs, schools, and night letters, all trademarks of the Taliban which could not be attributed to the several warring militias in the region. Helmand, by contrast, was largely peaceful. In the spring there had been a small number of incidents in Gereshk and there had been a flare-up in Musa Qaleh, in May, which resulted in the deaths of five Afghan soldiers. The latter had almost certainly been provoked by the continuing feud over control of the opium trade between

Akhundzada's allies and Mir Wali. In October there had been a series of explosions in Lashkar Gah. One of these killed a Governor Haji Manaf Khan (almost certainly assassinated by a rival) and ISAF did nothing. Over the course of the year there had been just three reported incidents at Kajaki Dam. In 2004, on average, Helmand was reporting just one violent incident per month.

All this changed in 2005 with the arrival of Task Force Bayonet and the ramping up of operations by CJSOTF (Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force). The impact of roaming American special force units quickly became apparent. In June, three IED incidents were recorded at Lashkar Gah where the newly built PRT was built. In July, the first shoot-out in Sangin was recorded. The increasing unrest seemed to reach a climax in September when a reported 50-60 insurgents attacked the police headquarters in Lashkar Gah. Almost ten incidents were reported that month – a new record – including numerous gun battles in the Sangin and Upper Gereshk Valleys. With the onset of winter the levels of violence declined but Helmand was now recording roughly one incident per week, a fourfold increase on the previous year. This period was crucial because the British were conducting their reconnaissance of Helmand at this time. Whether or not the reconnaissance parties noted this worrisome development is unclear.

In 2006, Task Force Bayonet handed over to Task Force Aegis and the levels of violence jumped again. Gereshk, where FOB Price had been built, experienced its first suicide attack in January. In February, Sangin witnessed a gun battle between locals and the police which left seven policemen dead. There were five further shoot-outs in and around the town that month. The newly-built FOB Robinson, just south of the town, in particular became a source of local resentment. On 16 March, even as the first elements of the British task force were arriving at Camp Bastion, the first British soldier wounded in action was recorded – reportedly an SBS marine evacuated from FOB Price. Two weeks later a great mêlée broke out in Kajaki Olya between the police and a reported 100-200 villagers. Whatever the rights or wrongs of the grievance, the villagers seemed to have got their revenge. In May, an IED was placed outside a compound targeting the police chief's family.

There were two separate developments that suggest the blame cannot be placed simplistically on American special force operations. By 2005, the phenomena of school burnings and night letters had begun to make their appearance in the province.[280] Both, as we have seen, were attributable to hard-line Taliban, possibly encouraged by the ISI. An early example of night letter, shown below, is revealing of the narratives that informed

Afghan resistance to outside interference:

'Islamic Imarats [sic] of Afghanistan, for the brave warlords of Afghanistan, salam alaikoon. As you know that Afghanistan is the land of brave people and historical people who at the first time in the cradle his child kid how to be brave [sic]…in the last century, the Afghanistan warlord people were abused, killed, and threatened by the superpowers like England and Russia that broke Afghanistan in pieces. But still the warlords and brave people of Afghanistan didn't give up and taught their enemy a lesson and took freedom for themselves…'[281]

Unfortunately, the detail of where these incidents were taking place appears to be lost, or was never properly recorded. Mapping such incidents would have provided as accurate a picture as any of the disposition of genuine Taliban in Helmand, on the arrival of the British. Without this information, it appears the truth will never be established.

For the next two months the level of tit-for-tat shootings rose significantly. The American Task Force Aegis and FOB Robinson appeared to be at the centre of much of the trouble. Whatever the soldiers were up to, it was clearly riling the locals. Suicide bombers were apparently being primed in Lashkar Gah and increasingly alarmist reports suggested that Taliban in the north were on the march and the towns of Now Zad and Musa Qaleh were imperilled. On 17 May these reports seemed to be confirmed when a gun battle erupted in Musa Qaleh which reportedly left two dozen policemen dead. Again, it was almost certainly a dispute between Baghrani and Akhundzada and the disorder was put down by one of Akhundzada's militias. This was an Afghan solution to an Afghan problem, but the 3 Para Pathfinder Platoon was despatched, at the behest of Daoud, to deal with the incident. Just over a week after John Reid left office, stating that British forces should *not* deploy to northern Helmand, the instruction had been ignored.

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Why did the British ditch their plan so precipitately? From the beginnings of ISAF in 2003 the biggest threat to the mission was perceived to be the scores of armed militias that still existed in the country. These featured consistently in ISAF literature and statements. There were many thousands of armed young men in the country. ISAF had no firm idea how many there really were. All that it knew was that they did not owe allegiance to the central government and therefore they represented an obstacle to the entire Western project of spreading governance throughout the country. These militias were loosely dubbed ACMs or Anti-Coalition Militias. The point about the Anti-Coalition Militias,

paradoxically, was that ISAF was doing almost nothing about them, for two reasons. First, there were too many of them. And second, they were the private property of powerful individuals with whom ISAF was trying to cultivate relations. As late as 2013, General Abdul Manan charged with overseeing the DIAG (Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups) was reporting that there were still as many as 350 such groups in northern Afghanistan alone, that represented a bigger threat to the state than the Taliban.[282] The 'big four' in Helmand were controlled by Governor Sher Akhundzada; his head of police the Noorzai Abdul Rahman Jan; the Barakzai Mir Wali whose militia was actually counted as part of the Ministry of Defence, and the Sangin-based Alikozai Dad Mohammad Khan who headed up the provincial National Directorate of Security (NDS). These favoured their respective tribes, acutely at the expense of the incensed Ishakzai in Sangin who had seen their man, Atta Mohammad displaced.

For Afghans, the radically different attitude that ISAF adopted in dealing with militias and 'the Taliban' was not missed. The laissez faire stance was rapidly abandoned if the gunmen were labelled 'Taliban'. Helmandis had been duping gullible Americans for the last five years by naming rivals as 'Taliban' (some of whom unfortunately ended up in Guantanamo). Now the naïve British were about to fall for the same game. If Governor Dauod had told Butler that the latest round of a long-standing clan dispute between two militias had erupted in Musa Qaleh, it is implausible the Pathfinder Platoon would have made the long drive north to this town. When Daoud colourfully painted a picture of the black flag of the Taliban flying over Sangin (the Taliban actually flew white flags), he was doing so with the certain knowledge that this was a red rag to ISAF – if the reader will excuse the mix of flags. It is inconceivable that Daoud did not know this was not an accurate characterisation of the situation in Sangin, and indeed the British seemed to understand there was an ongoing clan dispute in the town, but it was the magic invocation of the word 'Taliban' that was providing the necessary spur for action. Thus did 'Taliban' become the incantation that undid the British.

This raises the question: was there an intelligence failure? If there was, it unfortunately rested with the Americans. After a five year tenancy there should have been gigabytes of intelligence on Helmand. There almost certainly was, but it was the wrong sort of intelligence. The US special forces that transited through Helmand were not especially interested in *understanding* Helmand, beyond the realm of the power brokers they were co-opting into their 'war on terror'. The 'specialporce', as Michael Martin's brilliant study on Helmand has extensively described, were basically interested in hunting down

‘terrorists’ and their perceived allies, the Taliban.[283] Butler himself later asserted, ‘…there was very detailed special forces-gathered intelligence and security services intelligence, and very detailed reports were being written …about the nature and structure of the Taliban and what the leadership was…What happened to that intelligence, and why it did not feed into the various Government Departments, I am not sure and I find that is a major shortcoming.’[284] This information did not remain in ‘intelligence silos’; it was shared. The problem with the intelligence was that it revealed a great deal about the American obsession with ‘Taliban’, particularly in the far north where as many as 400 ‘Taliban’ were believed to lurking under the leadership of Baghrani. But it offered much less insight into Helmand society, the power structures, and the root causes of conflict. These important factors were seemingly less important than ‘terrorist’ Taliban. The detailed intelligence that Butler alluded to was not good. It was narrow and unfortunately reinforced predisposed attitudes in a personality like Butler. Michael Martin’s study is a stunning exposition of everybody’s poor understanding of Helmand Province.

When the paratroopers arrived in Musa Qaleh, they found that the reported ‘Taliban’ attack had been beaten off. The Akhundzada militia promptly headed off to the hills, followed by the soldiers, and these shooed away the remaining ‘Taliban’ to Baghran for good measure. The Pathfinders had no way of knowing that what they had actually witnessed was Akhundzada’s men (in this case Amir’s militia), beating up Baghrani’s boys – not the repulse of a Taliban offensive. Three days later, on 20 May, paratroopers were again despatched north to deal with reported ‘Taliban’ threat to Kajaki Dam. Once again, Reid’s stricture was being ignored and nobody it appears was questioning this change of mission. They found no Taliban although it was clear there was a general hostility towards the provincial government at Kajaki. Concurrently an incident occurred near the town of Sangin in which two French special force soldiers were reported missing by Afghan soldiers, after what appeared to have been a deliberate ambush. They may have been mistaken for opium poppy eradication teams which were provoking significant friction in the area. Their mutilated bodies were later recovered by A Company on 21 May. On 22 May, it was reported that the town of Now Zad was about to fall following a gun battle between a police chief, an unsavoury paedophile named ‘Haji’, and local tribesman.[285] Again, a paratrooper company was sent to quell the violence – this time the newly arrived B Company – and once again they found a peaceful town. On 23 May, after significant pressure from Daoud, the Pathfinders found themselves once again making the journey to Musa Qaleh to deal with reported ‘Taliban’. On 24 May, Doaud summoned the

British commander at the Lashkar Gah PRT and demanded that a British force be despatched to Baghran to rescue a government official who was being threatened by 'Taliban'. After some rushed arrangements, two Chinook loaded with A Company headed off to mount the rescue (named Operation Bag Wrap). The operation proved to be an anti-climax. The threat had been exaggerated and the stricken official, far from cooperating with the paratroopers and obeying their instructions at the rendezvous, almost scuppered the mission.

All these incidents had been relatively trivial by Afghan standards, even if they were increasing. Bouts of violence had flared up in Helmand in the years before the British arrived and these had been resolved by the local powerbrokers. The notion that northern Helmand was about to fall to a Taliban army – a justification that would be later used to justify the actions that 16 Air Assault Brigade took - was greatly over-played. The Wikileaks *Afghan Logs* reveals this was simply not the case. What the secret reporting clearly shows is: first, that local corruption was causing periodic flare-ups; second, that there were unresolved clan disputes in the province, largely driven by drug feuds and land disputes; third, that American special force units were stirring this mix unnecessarily; and lastly, that wherever the Americans had built a base, there had been resentment and eventually a spiral of attacks. What was striking about ISAF-published enemy activity maps from this period was that the red colour coded districts (indicating high levels of enemy activity) coincided exactly with American special force operations and bases.[286] These included Musa Qaleh, the Upper Sangin Valley, and the Upper Gereshk Valley. FOB Robinson was the textbook example. By the time the British started taking over this location, local resentment over special force operations had grown to such a pitch the base had been attacked dozens of times.

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Task Force Helmand was ultimately responsible for the actions it took in the summer of 2006, but there is strong evidence that a misguided American special force campaign in Helmand contributed to undermining the British operation before it even started. To Helmandis, the aggressive Americans were known as the 'specialporce'.[287] This label meant many things to many actors: patronage, weapons, money, and the chance to see off rivals by hinting to the 'specialporce' that an individual was a 'Taliban'. This Afghan game was played with some gusto. The other magic word was 'terrorist' which clearly excited the Americans and sent them chasing after marginal and, it appears, completely innocent Helmandis who were unscrupulously sold for bounties.[288] As one prominent

Helmandi commander later remembered, he was never able to work out why the Americans were ‘so stupid’.[289] To be fair, ‘stupid’ was also the word used to describe the British, and the single British officer who resigned over Operation Herrick 4 also shared this sentiment.

Pinning the blame on the American task force is not entirely fair. In the US Armed Forces’ *Special Warfare* magazine, a Captain Paul Toolan, serving with 3 Special Forces Group and a veteran of three Afghan deployments by 2005, gave a candid and self-critical view of the campaign:

‘If we do not adopt a comprehensive model to address the complexity of the situation and acknowledge that the counterinsurgency is still in its infancy, we may succumb to the complexity in such a way as to raise the cost of success to an exorbitant level…

The formula for success in Afghanistan has to be a strong counterinsurgency strategy, based on a tailor-made threat model for Afghanistan that seeks to prepare the Afghan national security forces to assume responsibility for their own destiny. This strategy will have to be coupled with a reconstruction effort that has a conventional-force security blanket to create a safe and stable environment in which good governance and economic reconstruction efforts can thrive. Without the strategy, we must be prepared to accept the inflated bill in time, resources and lives that may be the result of too many well-intentioned but disjointed blueprints for victory in Afghanistan.’[290]

This astute article was published in the same month that 3 Para began its first patrols in Helmand. There were honest and intelligent voices reporting that all was not well.

The biggest fixation – already alluded to in this chapter – was with Baghrani and northern Helmand, which almost certainly contributed to the intelligence assessment that there were some hundreds of ‘Taliban’ fighters in the north. This was probably a complete nonsense. Perhaps the biggest charge against the five year American tenure in Helmand was that no serious attempt was made to map and understand the tribal and power dynamics in the province. For the British, the combination of all these events – and ignorance - set a pattern in which they would start acting like a puppy chasing whatever ball was tossed at them.

The spark that eventually detonated the powder keg of Helmand was lit in the near-biblical, impoverished and deeply backward settlement of Now Zad. It is difficult to conceive, scanning photographs taken by soldiers who served in this isolated outpost, how Now Zad, a ‘shite-hole’, could have possibly mattered to anyone. The round fact of the

matter was that it did not (within six months of the departure of ISAF, in the summer of 2015, Now Zad lapsed back into insurgent hands, an entirely predictable outcome).

Now Zad - which means ‘New Born’ in Farsi - was a forgotten town at the end of the line. It had one barely functioning clinic and one dilapidated school. Like most ‘towns’ in Helmand it comprised of a single bazaar road, the length of a running track, around which a maze of compound houses had been built. Perhaps 7,000 people called Now Zad home. Around half were Ishaqzai, originally from the Sangin area, with Noorzai, Barakzai and Alikozai making up most of the remaining tribal groups. During the Taliban era, the Ishaqzai and Noorzai had joined forces and apparently supplied many fighters and commanders to the cause.[291] Due to falling water levels the population in Now Zad had been dwindling for several years and average farm sizes had fallen to less than two hectares. The western escarpments bordering the town were marked by the evidence of some old quarries. Pylons had once been erected but they were still waiting for an electricity grid that never reached the town.

Now Zad had been completely neglected by the Afghan government for decades and effectively ran its own affairs. The small force of ANP stationed in the town was untrained, corrupt and in league with the local narcos. When the Taliban took over Helmand, the locals had happily sided with the new order, rather than tolerate a rapacious local government. For an outsider it had the squalid banality and anonymity of all those places where soldiers have died which instantly provoke the question: why did this place matter? The Soviet Army had built a firebase on a small conical hill over-looking the settlement, and later abandoned it along with a spiked gun. Half-filled trenches still existed on the hillside, like gaps caused by pulled teeth. When the British arrived they would build their base over the palimpsest of the old Soviet gun positions. This was probably the only event of significance that had happened in Now Zad in several generations. The town was dying and just about the only rentable economic activity was the opium trade.

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On 22 May, B Company of 3 Para debouched into Now Zad. They arrived at the behest of Doaud, convinced that the town was about to fall to the Taliban. There was no warning and there was no explanation to the locals. The unexpected arrival of B Company, however, produced no reaction. Far from being a town about to fall to the Taliban, Now Zad gave the impression of being a place lost in rural somnolence. The residents of the town and the surrounding villages may have been taken unawares by the arrival of these

aliens but there was no hostility.

The paratroopers busied themselves restoring the old police station, a large, dilapidated compound house on the bazaar street without running water, electricity or toilets, to a liveable state. The station was a typical example of Afghan-wide institutional decrepitude but notwithstanding its state, it was also the only symbol of local government authority in a valley living without law, or at any rate, without state law. Rural communities had always regulated themselves with a mix of local custom and Sharia law. Land or marriage disputes were resolved by elders and clerics, not policemen and government clerks. The paratroopers also took time to patrol the town and familiarize themselves with their new surroundings. The locals pursued the rhythms of their everyday lives, seemingly untroubled by this change to the normal pattern of things.

ANA patrols visiting Now Zad just before the arrival of the British had not reported simmering revolt. They had reported townspeople who were pleased to see the appearance of the soldiers, as well as reporting the usual litany of complaints about police corruption and inefficiency. There was some violence in the district but this was put down to tribal disputes – a pattern that could be found anywhere in Afghanistan. If the attitude of the local people was friendly, what was the point of rushing the newly-arrived British troops to this town, or indeed to any other town in the north? The so-called ‘Afghan Development Zone’ was centred on the provincial capital Lashkar Gah and the commercial capital Gereshk, not on a remote town twenty-four hours drive away.

For eleven days nothing happened. Then on the 2 June, 10 Platoon of the Royal Gurkha Rifles, commanded by a twenty-four year old Lieutenant Paul Holingshead arrived in Now Zad. The Gurkhas had been sent to relieve the paratroopers but there was a second motive behind the arrival of these reinforcements. Along with the Gurkhas, two more companies of paratroopers (A and D Companies) would be arriving in Now Zad, joined by the battlegroup’s tactical HQ and the Patrols Platoon. It was now Freakley’s turn to push the British into undertaking a petty and ultimately disastrous mission.

American forces were mounting a much larger operation – Operation Mountain Thrust – in northern Helmand. It would be the last of the futile sweeps carried out by American forces in this area. 3 Para would become part of this wider effort and launch the battlegroup’s first major operation. It was called Operation Mutay and it was scheduled to take place on 4 June.

The aim of Operation Mutay – a cordon and search operation – was to apprehend a local ‘Taliban’ commander. The intelligence for this operation came from the Americans

in Kandahar keen to get the British into the fight. In private, this amounted to frustration on the part of General Freakley at what was perceived to be the lack of a British desire to fight. Why this particular commander mattered – if that is what he was - was difficult to understand. He lived a twenty minute walk away from the police station where the paratroopers had been camped for almost two weeks. Not a single hostile shot or gesture had been directed at the British. If he was a Taliban, he appeared to be an especially supine if not pacific example of insurgent. As intelligence on 'Taliban' commanders was primarily being sourced from crafty Afghans exploiting American special forces to settle inter-tribal feud, the probable truth is that this individual was just another example of clumsy 'Taliban' labelling by gullible Americans. Did the British, who had only just arrived in Now Zad, have any real sense of who he was or what his standing was in the local community, or why, even, he represented a threat to the provincial government in Lashkar Gah? It seems unlikely.

'Taliban' were not outlaws in Helmandi eyes. Probably, every one of the province's village, town and district leaders could be described as 'Taliban' inasmuch as they had once accommodated and lived peaceably with the previous regime. Some may have embraced the Taliban with enthusiasm and some may have merely tolerated Taliban rules, but you had to be very careful before casting the Taliban stone at anyone, lest it bounce back and hit you. As one local journalist laughingly later told an American researcher, you could not live in Helmand without having friends in the Taliban.[292] More importantly, Helmand's hierarchy of elders was not in opposition to the Afghan government in Kabul. They were just in opposition to a newly appointed governor who had displaced their man, and villagers detested the corrupt police force. There was also an underlying tension and suspicion over British intentions over the poppy crop. Over time, if the British had delivered on their promises of reconstruction, this opposition may have waned. Engineer Daoud may have been feted as a popular governor. None of this was to pass.

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On the morning of 4 June Operation Mutay rolled out. The appearance of so many soldiers could not have gone unnoticed. As a Gurkha platoon drove towards the compound where the reported Taliban commander lived they stumbled across some young men. One of the men ran inside a compound and re-appeared with an RPG launcher on his shoulders which he fired off in the direction of the surprised Gurkhas. It missed. The Gurkhas responded with small arms fire and a general mêlée broke out. The impetuous youth who fired the RPG was killed – the first tribesman to be killed by British forces on Operation

Herrick. Soon the entire area echoed with the sound of gunfire. In a town where every male owned a rifle, this was a clarion call to arms. 3 Para's blooding in Helmand province was about to turn into a very long day. The local response to this unexpected and unprovoked aggression was disorganised and random. Groups of armed men began to appear in the hedge lines and ditches ready to take on the intruders. They were elusive and seemed to be everywhere. The Gurkhas had managed to successfully extract themselves carrying a policeman that had been shot in the stomach, but two Chinook's worth of paratroopers who had landed north of the target area, including Lieutenant Colonel Tootal, would spend the next four hours locked in running battles.

For the over-excited, and over-brave tribesmen, it proved a lethal experience. With Apaches and an American A-10 loitering overhead, the armed villagers were easy prey. By the end of the day the battlegroup reported killing over thirty 'enemy', although this number would later be revised downwards.[293] Nothing of significance was found: a few bullets, a grenade and some opium bags. Such a find would not have been untypical of the average compound in Helmand. No soldier had been killed or injured. The better trained paratroopers had whitewashed the locals in a bloody day's fighting, although there had been some close moments. The young soldiers who took part in Operation Mutay were no longer green - they were now combat veterans and there was a real sense of elation in the British camp. As one paratrooper put it, it had been good fun.[294] For the tribesmen a quite different emotion was being experienced. As dusk fell a profound sense of shock seized Now Zad. The aliens who had arrived two weeks ago with their smiles and promises had proved to be murderers.

The echoes of the shots fired in Now Zad rebounded all the way back to Sangin (where it appears the tribesmen may have originated). They then travelled north to the town of Musa Qaleh and forked right reaching Kajaki. All of northern Helmand was set alight by the news. Before Operation Mutay the British had not fired a single round in Helmand province.[295] After the events in Now Zad the ammunition expenditure graph spiked like a runaway hyper-inflation chart. Following a lull, Now Zad broke out into a general rebellion. It would last for over 100 days. By the end of the month Sangin had detonated in the face of the British. The 'siege of Sangin' would wax and wane for the rest of the brigade's deployment in Helmand. Musa Qaleh was next and Kajaki soon followed. Everywhere the British would find themselves under siege from an irate local population.

Mutay was another Bloody Sunday that would have far-reaching consequences for the British campaign in Helmand Province. The operational plan was abandoned and would

be replaced by contingency and escalating cycles of violence. Who fired the first shot, in a sense, was an irrelevant question. Like the tragedy of Bloody Sunday whoever fired the first shot was always likely to provoke a general and violent response. Neither side was going to stop once the smell of cordite was in the air. Faced with a clear threat to his paratroopers, Tootal responded with force. It would later be insinuated that 'the maroon machine' needed little invitation to swing a punch. A serious author like Professor Anthony King would assert that Operation Herrick 4, in this respect, had been a reflection of the aggressive airborne ethos.[296]

This was unfair. It was purely coincidental that a parachute battalion had been involved – it could have been any line infantry battalion. 3 Para had not deployed to Helmand looking for a fight, although Tootal expected one. Both Butler and Tootal were under immense pressure to 'do something' from a number of actors – they did not seek gratuitous action. Tootal could not have refused to undertake Operation Mutay – he was a subordinate commander within a wider American-led operation.

Operation Mutay took place because of the coincidence of ebulliated minds in the personalities of Governor Doaud and General Freakley. In this mix, Britain's foreign policy in Afghanistan effectively fell on the shoulders of a paratrooper lieutenant colonel, newly- arrived in a country he barely understood, who was then dispatched on a misguided mission to a remote town, to thwart an imagined Taliban threat. Tootal, ultimately, was let down. First, he was let down by a lack of serious British political representation in Lashkar Gah. Viewing events with a spyglass from the comfort of the British Embassy in Kabul was hopeless. He was let down by an absence of meaningful intelligence, other than what the Americans were feeding the British. This was unfortunately distorted by a fixation with imagined 'terrorists'. He was let down by a reconstruction effort that only existed on paper – organising football matches was not going to redress Helmand's economic problems. Lastly he was let down by a Whitehall that should have been paying much closer attention to this British military operation in its genesis.

The consequences of Mutay were immediate and irreversible. The task force quickly became fixed defending 'platoon houses' and commanders did what commanders are always tempted to do when a plan unravels – they began to ask for more troops. When Lieutenant General Dannatt, C-in-C Land and about to be appointed CGS, visited Helmand just one week later, Butler made exactly this request: 'he asked for additional troops and more helicopter support to make up for that lost manoeuvre capability'.[297] The

alarm bells, at this stage, should have been ringing.

Following Operation Mutay an uneasy calm descended on Now Zad. The same was not true elsewhere in northern Helmand where word of the British massacre spread.

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One week later, on 11 June, the battlegroup suffered its first combat fatality – Captain Jim Philippson, a gunner – killed by gunfire when a patrol based at FOB Robinson tried to retrieve a Desert Hawk mini-UAV it had lost on the far bank of the Helmand River. The situation then deteriorated further. On 13 June, A Company was again called out to rescue an American convoy that had been ambushed near Sangin. On 17 June, following intensive American pressure, a small detachment was sent to Kajaki Dam. French Force (named after the officer in charge) drew blood in a mortar exchange and the British were then requested to deploy a permanent guard at the dam. On 18 June, inter-tribal fighting flared up in Sangin and a local politician's son was wounded in a gun fight. Pressed by Governor Daoud, A Company was despatched to Sangin to rescue the wounded man on 21 June (Operation Clab). He turned out not to be badly wounded but as at Kajaki, once a British force had deployed to one of these northern locations, there were calls for a permanent presence and A Company would soon find itself stuck in Sangin. On 27 June, two British special force soldiers were killed outside Sangin and B Company was sent to recover the bodies. On the same day a patrol from C Company patrolled to a village called Zumbelay, east of Gereshk, accompanied by the *Sunday Times* reporter, Christina Lamb and her photographer Justin Sutcliffe. This was a mixed Barakzai and Khugyani settlement. The aim of the patrol was to spread 'hearts and minds' but the paratroopers were ambushed and were lucky to escape with their lives. Unbeknown to the soldiers, Zumbelay was where a number of sacked ex-Hizb fighters from the disbanded 93rd Division hailed from; they were hardly likely to be welcoming to Westerners who had forced them into unemployment. Some had since offered their services as 'Taliban'. The story of the gunfight at Zumbelay caused a sensation. Up to this point the government had been assiduous in promoting Operation Herrick as an essentially benign stabilisation operation. Now Britons were reading dramatic accounts of paratroopers fighting for their lives. As a result of *The Sunday Times* story there would be a clamp down on embedded reporting, although this was denied by the MOD (from Ed Butler's subsequent testimony it is apparent the MOD was lying, and there was indeed an attempt to stifle 'negative reporting'). It was too late anyway. The genii had been let out of the bottle and a narrative of reconstruction had been replaced by a story about destruction. As Christina Lamb

wrote:

‘The ambush of our lightly armed patrol not only was unexpected but also brought into question the entire strategy being pursued by the British in Helmand, the huge province they have taken on.’

For the newly appointed Defence Secretary, Des Browne, the turn of events in Helmand was a cause of concern. Iraq, as he later admitted, consumed his time: ‘I was totally focussed on Iraq in the initial days, so from my point of view, having forces deployed in two environments, and conducting two wars was challenging.’[298] He first visited Helmand in mid-June (immediately after General Dannatt) and then in early July when he directly posed the question why the British were becoming involved in fighting and not reconstruction. The answer he received – that the British had been sent to support the Afghan governor in Helmand, and that this implied confronting the Taliban – was unsatisfactory. In Iraq, the Labour government was firm imposing its will on the British Army – clearly, it had to because of the political toxicity of this thoughtless war. Even if the British Army had been more enthusiastic over Basra, which it was not, the government was not going to allow Operation Telic descend into a military playground and long-term, fruitless counter-insurgency war. In Afghanistan the reverse happened and the army led the government by the nose. It was a measure of just how quickly this happened that Des Browne felt obliged to issue a statement that gave an official stamp to the mythology of Operation Herrick 4. His justification for the change of mission is worth quoting in full for two reasons. First, because it cemented a fallacy that would dominate British operations for much of the war, and second, because it was discussed at Cabinet level and received the endorsement of the Prime Minister, Tony Blair:[299]

‘The original intent was to tackle the challenges incrementally, spreading security and reconstruction from the centre of Helmand out. But commanders on the ground grasped an early opportunity. They saw the chance to reinforce the position of the local Governor and the Afghan army and police by going into Northern Helmand, and challenging the impunity of the Taleban there. In doing this, we moved faster towards achieving our ultimate objectives, but extended ourselves. This is a development we must respond to. But it is our actions that have brought about this development, our decisions and our determination to grasp the challenge. It is not, as some suggest, a failure to anticipate a violent response to our arrival. Yes the violence has increased, but that was inevitable. We are challenging the power of the Taleban and other enemies of the Afghan government, and they are reacting. But despite their efforts, we are spreading security.’[300]

The notion that 3 Para had spread across Helmand chasing fugitive threats because it represented an ‘opportunity’ was claptrap (although the paratroopers certainly now faced a ‘challenge’). They had done so because Daoud and Freakley had pressed them to do so. They also did so because Ed Butler believed the war would have to ‘go north’. The weasel phrase actually came from a PowerPoint presentation given by Butler to Browne in the June visit in which the former argued that the ‘platoon houses’ deployment was acting as a block to a potential Taliban advance against central Helmand – an indication of just how quickly the Operation Herrick 4 myth was established.[301] The argument that an increase in violence was inevitable was also weak. It was the British task force that provoked the violence, as General Jackson later conceded by poking a stick in ‘the Taliban anthill’ and causing the ants to run around.[302] The American Operation Mountain Thrust undoubtedly contributed to this needless stick-poking. Before the arrival of the British, Helmand had been lawless, but not especially violent by Afghan standards. Far from moving the British more quickly towards their ‘ultimate objectives’, Operation Herrick 4 was a setback from which the British struggled to recover for the next four years, until the arrival of US marine reinforcements. Every subsequent defence secretary would feel obliged to repeat this mythology. Two years later, the balanced John Hutton made the assertion that if the British had not gone into Southern Afghanistan in 2006 the Taliban would probably control Helmand and Kandahar, a quite exaggerated re-telling of history.[303]

For 10 Platoon left manning the police station at Now Zad, this spin was of little relevance. The lull that followed Operation Mutay did not last and soon they found themselves under attack day and night. All pretence of patrolling was abandoned and the small force fell back on defending the outpost. The Gurkhas would later compile a map of Now Zad showing all the insurgent firing points. In total, there were thirty-seven – the whole town had ganged up on them. To counter the increasing threat a second Gurkha platoon was despatched to Now Zad on 2 July (11 Platoon commanded by Lieutenant Angus Mathers), and command was assumed by Major Dan Rex.[304] At this stage the British had not abandoned the hope that the situation might be resolved through dialogue. On 11 July Major Rex organised a shura with the town elders to explain the purpose of the British mission and to emphasise that he did not seek confrontation. The shura was poorly attended and his words fell on deaf ears. The elders simply wanted the British to leave, the same message they would receive elsewhere in Helmand. After the failure of this shura, an outright attempt by the local tribesmen to oust the British from the police station began in earnest. A wave of attacks followed reaching a crescendo two days later when the station

came close to being over-run. Sangars received direct hits from RPGs and the weight of fire was so heavy the Gurkhas could not man their fire positions. At one point the assailants advanced as far as the perimeter wall of the police station and the defenders had to throw grenades to keep them at bay.

Faced with this outburst of violence the British compensated for their numerical inferiority by resorting to air power. This did not stop the attacks – they would continue unabated for another two weeks - but the aerial bombardments did destroy the bazaar. This destruction was mirrored inside the police station that began to resemble a rubbish dump. Living in these degrading conditions was testing enough and was made worse by the fact that the only water the Gurkhas could access was polluted water drawn from a well. It was also clear the ANP, rather than assisting the British, were colluding with the locals attacking the base. Their only value – and the reason why the Gurkhas tolerated the police – was that they could understand what was being said over the VHF radios. Some of the accents were Pakistani and Iranian suggesting that the British presence had attracted narco-traffickers or freelance jihadists from outside the local area. On 16 July a further batch of reinforcements was sent which included a mortar detachment and machine gun team manned by fusiliers. This allowed the Gurkhas to hit back at the Taliban mortar teams as well as engage the attackers at longer ranges. The intensity of the fighting in Now Zad over the month of July was reflected in the ammunition expenditure: 30,000 rounds of 5.56mm ball, 17,000 rounds of 7.62mm link, and 2,000 rounds of .50 cal were expended.[305] Over a two week period, twenty-eight assaults were repelled, and the soldiers reckoned they accounted for 100 insurgents. The British themselves were very fortunate not to have suffered fatalities.[306] Shamefully, no Gurkhas received gallantry awards for this desperate defence of the Now Zad police station.

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On 30 July the relief of the beleaguered force finally got underway. Over 500 troops were committed in Operation Oqab Qurbani which included a company of paratroopers and a company from 2 RRF (that would directly relieve the Gurkhas).[307] HCR provided armoured support, and 7 RHA was stood by to provide artillery support with Light Guns. The intention was to hold Now Zad for a matter of days before withdrawing, following a negotiated settlement. The settlement never happened and A Company, led by Major Jon Swift, ended up spending over 100 days under siege - the longest in the army's modern history and an epic worthy of imperial forebears. For the duration of the siege the fusiliers lived on rations. This was the longest sustained period on rations ever recorded and it

provoked scientific interest when the soldiers returned home.[308]

The luck enjoyed by the fusiliers cannot be over-stated. By now the British were occupying a split position between the police station and the small, conical hill immediately west of the station which the Russians had once occupied. ANP Hill, as it became known, was very exposed and the rocky ground was lethal due to shell splinters. The fusiliers vainly tried to erect whatever cover they could on the rock hard ground but like the more famous Spion Kop there was little cover to be had. Over the course of the siege more than fifty mortars landed on the hill, several detonating within a few metres of the crouching fusiliers.[309] It was a miracle no one was killed. The tenacity of this enemy deeply impressed the British. Some local tribesmen demonstrated bravery so suicidal it was suspected they were taking drugs. The isolation which the fusiliers felt was increased by the indifferent manner in which they were treated by the airborne staff at Bastion Camp. They received no regular updates on events happening elsewhere in Helmand and they received no items from the scarce trickle of equipment that was reaching the province. Frequently, they ran very low on ammunition. In the entire siege the fusiliers received just two telephone calls from the brigade HQ - a scandalous abandonment. As one officer put it, they often ‘did not have a clue what the rest the battlegroup was doing’.[310] Although the paratroopers would deny it, the fusiliers appeared to pay an unnecessary penalty from an unjustified prejudice on the part of airborne soldiers towards the rest of the army, who they regard as ‘hats’, short for ‘crap hats’.

By the end of the siege, when marines arrived in October, the fusiliers had endured 149 gun battles as well as mortar and rocket attacks. To repel the attackers they called air strikes roughly once every three days. Twenty-eight bombs were dropped on Now Zad, a place no bigger than an English village. This amounted to eighteen tons of high explosives which, unsurprisingly, completely trashed the once thriving bazaar.[311] The mortar detachment fired off more than 1,000 bombs – or more than a peacetime battalion would fire off in training in several years. The machine gunners rattled off 58,000 rounds with one soldier, Fusilier Dean Fisher becoming a media celebrity because he personally fired off almost half this amount.[312] Churchill’s self-satisfied description of ‘blind credulity and fanaticism, now happily passing away from the earth, under the combined influences of Rationalism and machine guns’ aptly described the fusiliers’ defence of Now Zad.[313] Like the Gurkhas before them, the fusiliers were overlooked in the operational awards list and received no gallantry medals for their feat of endurance. According to the locals, as many as 170 tribesmen may have been killed and probably three times this number was

wounded.[314] In a valley with a population of about 7,000 this meant everyone knew someone who had been killed or injured by the British. An unstoppable blood feud had been started.

The experience at Now Zad began to be repeated throughout other supposedly threatened towns in Helmand Province. Brigadier Ed Butler would later defend the decision to man the district centres on the grounds that it kept the fight north of Highway One and away from the provincial capital. The platoon house sieges would be described, after the event, as a necessary and inevitable 'break-in battle'. 16 Air Assault Brigade expected a fight and got it. This post-hoc justification is not credible. Lashkar Gah and Gereshk were not under threat and never would be. To suggest there was a Taliban army waiting to sweep south and over-run Helmand was fantasy. The break-in battle which the British referred to was not started by 'the Taliban' who ignored the newly arrived forces for two months (or six months, if the date of arrival of the British is taken from the beginning of the construction of Camp Bastion). The fight was started by the British who provoked a chain reaction of violence with and without incitement from real Taliban. American operations in Helmand did not help matters. Manning the district centres had exactly the opposite effect claimed by Butler. It provoked a southward migration of insurgent gangs as well as fomenting tribal insurrection elsewhere across Helmand.

It is to jump ahead in the story, but the point is so central it must be made now. The day after the last British soldiers quit Helmand, on 27th October 2014, a former commanding officer of 22 SAS Richard Williams wrote an opinion piece in the *Times*. It was telling that he waited until this moment before speaking out, and it begged the question how many other now retired British Army officers were sitting on the truth but keeping schtum. He wrote:

'What, I was asked was the SAS view on the effects of replacing the cash-rich but soldier-light American development team in Helmand with a cash-poor but paratrooper-secured British operation, which aimed to spend less money on development while simultaneously disrupting the narcotics industry and forcing a change of the provincial governor? Leaving aside the military weaknesses of not enough helicopters, air support or medical facilities, and woefully inadequate communications…we highlighted the most significant weakness in the plan to the visiting military planning team from London. This was led, surprisingly, by a submarine officer from the Royal Navy.

We forced upon the visiting sailor our view that no amount of fighting spirit and enthusiasm would secure a peace if the fragile balance of power in the province was

disrupted, if aid spending was reduced or if the governor was replaced…Our message was simple: don't challenge the status quo for now, build relationships locally over the long-term based on an increased amount of development aid, and keep the operation as low profile as you can and you might be able to achieve sustainable progress.'

Williams was absolutely right. In two paragraphs he sentenced the failure and folly of Operation Herrick 4. In the same article he further adumbrated the failings of the military leadership and called for an inquiry into the conduct of the war… Tootal and his paratroopers were the fall guys for the failings of a great many officials who have managed to escape inquiry or censure.

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The next town to flare up was Sangin, which had been at the heart of Helmand's opium trade since the 1970s. It is an unfortunate pathology of some military operations that an objective can take on the character of an irrational obsession.[315] In the summer of 2006, the town of Sangin gained this dubious distinction. Unfortunately for the British and US marines that followed, the pathological obsession lasted almost seven years. During this period the two allies would suffer over one hundred fatalities each 'securing' Sangin, and scores of young men would be left maimed; single, double, and triple amputees. The purpose of this sacrifice – to deny the insurgents a town so thoroughly corrupt, so anti-government and anti-Western, so beyond any reasonable hopes of meaningful reform – would have been quixotic, if it had not been tragic. The death toll amongst the local tribes, of course, was far higher, and parts of the town ended up as rubble. Nobody, in the end, won in Sangin.

The name meant 'heavy' or 'solid place' and it was once a caravan stopover on the confluence of the Musa Qaleh and Helmand Rivers. The main north-south route in Helmand, Route 611, passed through Sangin and the modern town had grown along the length of this gravel track. The town itself had a population of perhaps 20,000 but with the adjoining villages that merged into the outskirts of the town, this population doubled. The town centre had grown on either side of a shallow wadi – the Sangin Mandah – that ran east to west into the Helmand River. On Thursdays this wadi filled with market stalls and animals. North of the wadi, across a concrete bridge which the soldiers nicknamed 'the Sangin flyover'' was a bazaar area which had been laid out in a grid pattern. The shops followed the traditional Afghan style of a single, box-shaped unit with a grill front. When the fighting broke out this area would become deserted spelling economic disaster for the traders. Beyond the bazaar the ground rose slightly to an area nicknamed 'Wombat Wood'

(after a recoilless rifle that had been in service in the British Army, not the marsupial). ‘Wombat ‘Wood’ was more a series of tree lines and hedgerows that offered insurgents cover to launch their mortar and rocket attacks against the district centre half a kilometre away. One house in particular became a favoured sniping position – ‘JDAM House’ – a name earned from the number of JDAM bombs that were dropped in its vicinity (eventually it was destroyed by engineer demolitions as the bombing failed to stop locals from using it as a firing point).

South of the wadi, Route 611 divided at a Y-Junction. East of the junction were Sangin’s only prominent tall buildings: a dilapidated hospital, some Soviet-style flats and shops, and the improbably named ‘Florida Hotel’. In Afghanistan, it was widespread custom that relatives of patients lodged in ‘hotels’ adjoining hospitals from where they could both feed their ailing relatives and bribe the doctors as necessary. The soldiers re-named it ‘The Red Hotel’ from its colour and it became a well-used firing point. West of the Y-junction was Sangin’s main mosque – a large, flat building with twelve domes – more compounds and administrative buildings, and the district centre. The track leading to the district centre became known as ‘the pipe range’ from the number of gun battles that erupted there. Later it would be re-named ‘The Avenue of Hope’, which provoked predictable cynical observations. The district centre itself, later named FOB Jackson after the first paratrooper to die there, included the police station and the governor’s offices. The British would lease a half-built two-storey, brick building within the compound, which ironically belonged to one of Sangin’s better known narco-traffickers, a man named Haji Lal Jan. When the Taliban moved back into Sangin in December 2013, the redoubtable Jan was still standing, another example of Afghanistan’s great survivors. This building would be fortified and became known as the FSG (Fire Support Group) Tower. The British would also occupy the entire western half of the district centre, across a canal that divided the base in two halves, where accommodation blocks, a medical centre, a JOC (Joint Operations Centre) and the LS (Landing Site) would be established. South Sangin trailed away along Route 611, an area which included more bazaars and ‘millionaire’s row’, a collection of large, garish houses built by some of Sangin’s opium barons. The whole town sat inside a bowl surrounded by rocky, undulating ground and compound buildings that spread out in an ill-defined sprawl into the surrounding desert and green zone.

Sangin was a town that always threatened to spill over into violence from inter-tribal competition over the narcotics trade, a volatility that the British paratroopers poorly understood. The town was populated by Ishaqzai, Barakzai, Alikozai, Noorzai, Popalzai,

Achakzai, Alizai and even some Hazaras, mostly living in tribal ghettos but with some mixing on the outskirts. South Sangin was dominated by Ishaqzai with a Barakzai lodgement to the south-east. North Sangin was dominated by Alikozai. A band of Popalzai separated these from Ishaqzai concentrated around the village of Jusyalay. Further north, Alikozai held most of the lands around the village of Putay, with a second Barakzai lodgement north-east of the village. In the far north of the Sangin valley – an area known as the Saraven Qalay by the locals because it was once a caravan route – Alizai encroached on traditional Alikozai lands. This area was dense with narcotics laboratories and would later become targeted in British counter-narcotics operations.

The recent troubles in Sangin dated to the distribution of patronage following the fall of the Taliban. Supported by American special forces, the Alikozai Dad Mohammed was appointed head of the provincial National Directorate of Security (NDS). He in turn duly appointed two brothers Gul and Daud as Sangin District Governor and Police Chief, decisively ousting his rival, the Ishaqzai Atta Mohammed. This provoked a low-level war for control of Sangin's lucrative drug bazaars that was simmering when the British arrived. The Alikozai-Ishaqzai rivalry was further fanned by American special forces who fell for Dad Mohammed's 'intelligence leads' and began pursuing Ishaqzai 'commanders', adding to the sense of alienation of this tribe.[316] When the British arrived, the Barakzai Khan Mohammad, an Akhundzada ally, was Chief of Police. The ex-governor, Gul Mohammad had just been murdered by Ishaqzai, along with thirty-two family members, and this provoked his brother Dad Mohammad, now a Member of Parliament, into drawing the British into Sangin by portraying these events as a 'Taliban' assault.[317]

Three days after the arrival of B Company in Now Zad, on 25 May, the 3 Para Patrols Platoon, reinforced by 1 Platoon arrived in the district centre of Sangin after receiving reports that the town was about to fall to the Taliban. As with the deployment to Now Zad they found a peaceful if somewhat tense town. Anxious to unwind the commitment to effectively garrison Sangin, Lieutenant-Colonel Tootal ordered the withdrawal of the Patrols Platoon but was forced – for political rather than military reasons – to leave thirty odd paratroopers to man the district centre and to act as an OMLT (Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team, pronounced 'omelette'). The British four year occupation of Sangin DC effectively began on 30 May with the unlucky 1 Platoon, 3 Para, commanded by a Lieutenant Hugo Farmer. A short mission turned into a sojourn of several weeks (albeit, it appears 1 Platoon was extricated from its OMLT commitment so the deployment was not continuous). As at Now Zad, the British paratroopers did not find themselves under attack.

In fact, according to Hugo Farmer, the locals were basically curious and mostly friendly. [318]

Over this period, on 13 June, A Company was tasked to support the ambushed American convoy near Sangin, which had been travelling between Gereshk and Musa Qaleh. Immediately after this incident, 3 Para received three high profile visitors, Generals Dannatt, Richards and lastly Des Browne. At least Browne questioned why the task force was becoming embroiled in local fights. None, however, appears to have been sufficiently alarmed as to fundamentally re-evaluate the unexpected developments in Helmand. This was a lost opportunity.

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As we have seen, a series of events then sparked another call for British reinforcement and three weeks later, on 21 June, A Company, commanded by Major Will Pike, was loaded on four Chinooks and dropped off immediately west of the district centre in a wadi. The paratroopers had returned in strength. The reason for this second deployment – the rescue of Khan Mohammed's son - was controversial to at least one officer who later resigned his commission and wrote a book criticising what he described as an ignorant, clumsy and ultimately destructive mission.[319] According to Governor Daoud, Mohammed's son had been seriously injured in a fight with 'the Taliban'. There had been a local punch-up, but the governor almost certainly knew that the population in Sangin was in almost open rebellion against the Khan Mohammed, the corrupt police chief. Mohammed was a notorious bully who had reportedly raped a girl. Opinion in the town almost certainly applauded the retribution which had been delivered by the Ishaqzai, not the 'Taliban'. As with previous clashes with the ANP across Helmand, the locals resolved the problem themselves without the need for British intervention and chased the police chief out of town. Butler was aware of these shenanigans and remained wary. Lieutenant Colonel Tootal also opposed the mission and he was backed by Butler. The appearance of British troops might add fuel to the fire and the 3 Para battlegroup was already over-stretched. Nobody wanted to be seen to be backing a corrupt and unpopular official.

The day after the arrival of A Company a shura was held attended by Daoud. It ended in failure with the elders informing the governor they would have to consult with the Taliban before agreeing to a permanent British presence.[320] The de facto truce only lasted a week. On 27 June, just south of Sangin an SBS team mounted an operation to arrest a 'Taliban leader'. The paratroopers in Sangin knew nothing about the operation. Captain David Patten, serving with the Special Reconnaissance Regiment, and Sergeant Paul

Bartlett, a marine, were killed in the operation. A Gurkha contingent – 12 Platoon commanded by a Sergeant Major Trilochan Gurung - crashed out from FOB Robinson to rescue the men but fell into an ambush and ended up calling artillery and aerial support to extract itself, leaving behind a destroyed Land Rover WMIK.[321] The vehicle was hit by six RPGs but the crew baled sharply and were unscathed. The following day, B Company was flown to the area and the two bodies were retrieved. For the locals this botched operation was a signal that the truce was definitely over. The elders made one last attempt to persuade the British to leave and that night 'the siege of Sangin' began in earnest.

On 30 June local tribesmen appeared to make a concerted effort to over-run the base but failed with heavy losses on their side. The British responded with artillery fire and aerial bombardments, destroying parts of the now vacated town centre. The sheer weight of fire directed at the besieged paratroopers was inevitably going to take a toll and the British luck ran out on 1 July when a 107mm rocket scored a direct hit on the tower in the District Centre. Corporal Peter Thorpe, a Signaller, and Lance Corporal Jabron Hashmi, a rare Muslim soldier serving with the Intelligence Corps, were killed instantly by the strike. Five other soldiers were wounded. The shock of taking casualties was profound. This event changed the game and the mood of the soldiers.

Two days later B Company relieved the exhausted A Company. It did not take long for the newly-arrived company to be blooded. On 5 July, Private Damien Jackson was shot and killed just south of the base. The twenty year old from South Shields was the first British paratrooper to die in action in Helmand. For Major Giles Timms, the loss of one of his men proved a serious test of his leadership (Jackson was actually serving in 1 Platoon, A Company – the platoon had volunteered to stay behind in Sangin as B Company was short of one its platoons). Psychologically, no paratrooper wanted to concede defeat, but equally everyone knew that the fight in Sangin was pointless. Trying to motivate his men to step out of the district centre when virtually every patrol was coming under fire required special strength. Ingenuity was also demanded as the paratroopers sought ways to out-fox their opponents. After another week of heavy gun battles another shura was called on 15 July attended by Doaud, Butler and Tootal. Again it failed – by now, the elders just wanted the British to leave. Regardless of this failure, the British still needed to address the pressing matter of re-supplying the besieged base. On 18 July, a re-supply run was organised led by a Canadian company from FOB Robinson mounted in LAVs.[322] The Canadians joked about having to rescue the paratroopers but they were also appalled by the conditions the British were enduring in Sangin. It was the first glimpse that outsiders

had of the seriousness of the British position. Tootal and Butler were also becoming increasingly vocal over their concerns while acknowledging the political reality that they would not be allowed to withdraw from Sangin.

If the British were thinking privately of withdrawal, General Freakley was urging more aggression. On 14 July, 3 Para had mounted an operation to capture a reported Taliban commander who lived just north of Sangin. Operation Augustus was an American-inspired task with the ambitious goal of driving away the insurgents from the town centre and creating a security cocoon around the beleaguered district centre. It was part of the wider, ongoing Operation Mountain Thrust that was committing Canadian and American troops to similar operations in the Kandahar area. The follow-up reconstruction mission, in which it was hoped to engage with local elders, would be known as Operation Rana. Tootal had doubts that attacking a Taliban commander would make any significant difference to the situation in Sangin, perhaps with some wisdom gained from the experience of Operation Mutay in Now Zad, but it went ahead anyway.

For Operation Augustus, the target area was divided into a series of phase lines named after British rivers with individual compounds or other points of interest designated by a spot numbering system. Compound houses of special interest were marked with a red square. There were two: one called Claudius and a second called Tiberius. Supporting this operation was a stack of airborne strike and reconnaissance aircraft, both manned and unmanned. When the operation climaxed, the paratroopers were being over-watched by American Global Hawk and Predator UAVs; a US Navy P-3 Orion with surveillance cameras; a RAF Nimrod R1 signals intelligence aircraft; and a US Navy jamming aircraft. American airborne command and communication helicopters were providing ground links with a B-1B bomber, AC-130 Spectre gunship and A-10 Warthogs, all on standby to provide firepower, supported by Apache. Later, a venerable U-2 joined the operation. The point about this display of technological superiority, of course, was that it was almost all American. Not only were the majority of the manned and unmanned aircraft American but, crucially, the means of synchronising all these resources were American (Tootal himself flew in an American C2 Blackhawk from which he was able to coordinate the airborne package).[323] It would point to an important truth – Britain could not fight a hi-tech war without the generous indulgence of the United States.

Despite this overmatch of forces the landing proved hot. Five Chinooks carrying about 200 paratroopers from A and C Companies took off from Camp Bastion in the early hours of the morning. Tootal, in his airborne command post, could not see any of the UAV feeds

that were being relayed back to Camp Bastion. As the fleet approached the target area it became apparent there were people in the vicinity of the landing sites but none of the surveillance platforms could determine whether they were armed. With the Chinooks running dangerously low on fuel an Apache was sent forward to scan the area but was unable to detect any human presence. Faced with aborting or pursuing the mission Tootal took the difficult decision to land the troops.

It is unlikely that local tribesmen were actually waiting in ambush for the paratroopers but the noise of the circling Chinooks appears to have roused the neighbourhood. When the first helicopter landed it was met by a hail of wild gun fire. The second and third Chinooks followed and only the last two Chinooks, carrying C Company, aborted and turned away. One paratrooper was injured by small arms fire and a second broke his leg jumping off the rear ramp of the helicopter. To everybody's relief and amazement no Chinook sustained serious damage. After a violent gun fight in the dark the gunmen melted away leaving behind ten dead and a small amount of ordnance. No paratroopers were hurt in the confrontation. In the subsequent sweep, the Taliban commander whom the British had intended to capture either escaped or was never at the targeted compound in the first place. Despite the lack of a result, 3 Para was pleased. This had been the most complicated operation they had undertaken and it might have ended in disaster.

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In a follow-up meeting in Kandahar General Freakley was unimpressed and criticised the British for failing to do enough in front of an audience that included Daoud and the Canadian Brigadier, David Fraser.[324] The criticism, unsurprisingly, fell badly on the British who felt that their desperate attempts to hold the line across northern Helmand were simply not being appreciated. As anticipated, Operation Augustus had no effect at all on the siege in Sangin. Indeed, it inflamed the situation further. With no more troops to juggle, on 27 July, Tootal duly redeployed A Company to Sangin to take over from B Company.

A Company, now commanded by Major Jamie Loden, found themselves in a farcical situation. The few ANP in the base would have nothing to do with the paratroopers and would not even wear uniforms. The ANA platoon appeared to be taking drugs and running some sort of paedophile ring.[325] Determined not to allow the gunmen feel they were winning this contest of wills, Loden drove his men on through that blistering August. The firepower used by the British just to move a few hundred yards, was extraordinary. After 20 August, Loden recalled, every patrol leaving the base was supported by two GR.7

Harriers, a troop of 105mm guns, a mortar line, Scimitars and heavy machine guns manned by sappers in the sangars. In short, it was madness.

A number of the aerial attacks, inevitably, went awry. One bomb landed on the helicopter LS within the base but fortunately failed to detonate. Another rocket attack by a Harrier landed perilously close to the perimeter walls of the base prompting a throwaway comment in a leaked e-mail that the RAF was ‘utterly, utterly useless’. There was a suspicion of sexism in the remark (the pilot was female). A traditional army antagonism towards ‘the Crabs’, as the RAF was known, may have also contributed to the barbed outburst, but the fact was that the Harrier pilots were labouring with inadequate sensor pods compared to their American counterparts, a situation that would only finally be rectified when the MOD made an urgent procurement of American Sniper pods.

Another factor also counted against the British - there were simply not enough RAF aircraft to support the task force. Over the summer, 85 per cent of all close air support missions were conducted by American pilots. The remaining fifteen per cent was conducted by a mix of European pilots, including the small British contingent. In the case of aerial surveillance the imbalance was shocking: American aircraft were providing 97 per cent of all reconnaissance flights. The notion that the RAF entered the war with a credible intelligence gathering or strike capability was entirely false.

All this firepower meant that there were areas around the district centre that were beginning to resemble a First World War battlefield with great holes gouged out of the earth by the shells and bombs. It was also evident from electronic intercepts that Pakistanis had joined in the fight. Over the first two weeks of August several paratroopers were wounded by small arms fire or shrapnel. On 20 August, three more paratroopers were wounded when a section was ambushed in thick vegetation. The section commander, a tough Yorkshireman called Corporal Bryan Budd, charged the enemy. His body was later found within yards of three tribesmen, conjoined in death. For this action he was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross, the first of the war. It later emerged that Budd may have been shot by his fellow paratroopers. Whether or not this was the case, his courage and self-sacrifice were not in question. On 29 August, A Company was again relieved by C Company supported by a platoon of Royal Irishmen. By this stage, Loden’s men had fired off more than 20,000 rounds of small arms ammunition, over 500 mortar bombs, and more than 650 artillery shells – all to justify walking the distance of ‘the Pipe Range’ before withdrawing back to the security of the base. Sangin was not being ‘dominated’ by this firepower. It was simply being trashed.

As a measure of the severity of situation, it took a full battlegroup-level operation (Operation Baghi) to conduct the relief. The attacks on the Sangin district centre diminished in September but they never petered out completely. On 6 September the battlegroup suffered its last casualties at the district centre when a lucky mortar strike wounded four Irish rangers, one of whom subsequently died of his wounds. At the height of the siege of Sangin, in July, the British had held off forty-four attacks against the District Centre.

The third location where the British found themselves under siege was Kajaki Dam. Following Operation Enduring Freedom, the Americans had proposed restoring the turbine hall but the project had never quite got off the ground. In the meantime, USAID had contributed to several other smaller projects in the area including the building of a new police station, clinics and schools. When the British arrived in 2006 the dam was being guarded by a local militia led by an ex-American special force soldier called John Kravinach. The other American at the dam was a grizzled engineer called George Wilder who had been working on the single surviving turbine since 2004. His Afghan colleague, an engineer called Sayed Rassoul, had been working at the turbine hall for almost three decades. It was one of those impossibly isolated spots where only the dedicated or the mad elect to work. The militia was routinely shot at and mortared and the Americans were keen the British help by deploying a permanent force to the dam. The problem for Tootal was that he had no troops to spare.

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As described, on 17 June, after more pressure from General Freakley, the platoon-sized French Force deployed to the dam under the auspices of Operation Barcha. French Force included a mortars detachment and heavy machine guns, two weapons the civilian guard force lacked. Captain French decided the best way to end the routine of sniping was to play the villagers' own game. By now the locals had become so confident they set up their mortars at the same place and time, in full view of one of the security outposts. Unsuspectingly, the fighters arrived in their pick-ups to begin another attack and were ambushed by the paratroopers. One mortar bomb appeared to achieve a near direct hit, killing or injuring most of the gunmen. The paratroopers celebrated and the attacks against the dam stopped for the next week. Using this success as an excuse Tootal withdrew French Force, but after renewed pressure from the Americans, he was forced to establish a permanent presence at the dam shortly afterwards. The British occupation of Kajaki Dam had begun.

Kajaki was different to the rest of Helmand and would always remain so. The main reason for the difference was the ground. It was very hard for either side to actually hit each other because the hills offered perfect visibility to any defender. Once local fighters realised they could no longer approach the dam with impunity, because they were being watched, they resorted to ineffectual long range attacks. No British soldier would ever be killed or even wounded by these attacks. This logic would also apply against the British – every British casualty at Kajaki was suffered when the British chose to sally out of the dam to attack the locals. It was a stalemate from the beginning but it would take three years and over twenty fatalities before the British finally accepted the pointlessness of what they were doing and decided that holding the dam was sufficient (incidentally, the US marines who took over pursued the same futile game, and also incurred casualties, until it was their turn to leave). The other great difference was that Kajaki sat astride the ancient kingdom of Zamindawar. Fiercely independent, Zamindawaris had never accepted central government control, still less foreign armies. The Soviet Army was fought to a bitter stalemate in this area and the British were about to repeat the experience.

The paratroopers sent to Kajaki were ignorant of this history. To them, the ritual attacks were more than just an annoyance, they were a provocation that had to be confronted. In an effort to take the fight to the villagers, the paratroopers would become involved in the most controversial incident of the battlegroup's deployment when a team of snipers accidentally strayed into a minefield and suffered mass casualties.

The first week of September had already started badly for British forces in Helmand. On 2 September, XV302, a Nimrod MR2 surveillance aircraft, detonated in mid-air over Afghanistan killing all fourteen crew including a paratrooper and marine. The aircraft had only just taken off from Kandahar Air Base and crashed in front of Canadian troops preparing for Operation Medusa. At first, it was mistakenly reported as a crashed Ariana 727 but an American Chinook despatched to the scene soon confirmed the grim truth. 34 Squadron RAF Regiment deployed a flight to the crash site and spent the next thirty-six hours recovering body parts and equipment, a task compounded by looting locals. The gunners were lucky not to fall victims themselves to an opportunistic insurgent attack, repeating the experience of six Royal Military Policemen controversially killed in Anbar, Iraq, in 2003. Failed by their radios, the RAF men were saved by their flight commander who used his Nokia mobile phone to call for help.

Suspicion over the cause of the crash quickly fell on the air-to-air refuelling system that had been added to the aircraft during the Falklands Conflict with the hose literally running

between the pilot and co-pilot. Later, this inherently dangerous arrangement had been rectified, and the hose had been re-routed under panels that offered protection from accidental fire or heat. This solution had been deemed safe and the aircraft flew thousands of sorties without incident for many years. Over Afghanistan, the hidden potential danger in the fuel hose appeared to cost the lives of the crew, causing great controversy in the subsequent inquiry and eventually grounding the aircraft.

6 September then proved to be the blackest day for the 3 Para battlegroup. Three soldiers were killed and a further eighteen were injured in three separate incidents. The first setback took place precisely on the hillside observation posts (OPs) at Kajaki.

For several weeks the paratroopers had engaged in long range shooting and mortaring matches with villagers from the nearby settlement of Kajaki Olya. Perched on a vantage point almost 3,000 feet above the village the paratroopers were in no danger from the random fire. The Soviet army had once occupied the hilltop sanctuaries for the very same reason. To reinforce the advantage, Russian engineers had laid a number of anti-personnel minefields on the approaches to the pinnacles. In the intervening years, knowledge of the exact locations of the minefields was lost. The majority of the mines were known to have been laid on the western approaches to the mountain where dead ground would have allowed someone to climb almost undetected to the ridgeline. The two pimples guarding this approach had been nicknamed Sparrowhawk West and East. Soldiers manning the Sparrowhawk OPs took care to only use the worn ridgeline path which was known to be clear of mines.

If the hot-headed tribesmen were unable to seriously threaten the paratroopers overlooking their compounds, neither were the paratroopers able to land a punch back. Both sides were defeated by the geometry of the location. The village of Kajaki Olya was only about 1,000 metres away from the OPs as the crow flies. The hypotenuse of the triangle between the firing points extended this distance. The .338 calibre sniper rifle issued to the paratroopers had an effective range of about 800 metres in the hands of a marksman. To hit the tribesmen below the paratroopers would have to descend halfway down the mountain side and find a better vantage point.

This was the plan hatched on the morning of 6 September by the section manning an adjoining OP named Normandy. At 1,164 metres, Normandy OP was the highest of the spot heights on the ridgeline overlooking Kajaki Dam. It also sat squarely in the middle offering views in all directions. The OP itself was no more than a sandbagged sangar surrounded by rudimentary shelters which the paratroopers had built for themselves on the

rocky ground. On a peaceful day it was a good place to get a sun tan. On a cold day, and especially at night, it got very cold. Over the last few weeks the section at Normandy OP had noticed what appeared to be an illegal check point on Route 611, the gravel track that ran along the eastern side of the village and which followed the bend of the mountains leading to the dam itself. Anyone approaching Kajaki from the south had to use Route 611 - there was no other way of reaching the dam. The British consequently did not use the track as it was too obvious an ambush point. Illegal checkpoints were common in Helmand but it was nonetheless a frustrating reminder of the stalemate that had descended at Kajaki. The British, like the Russian soldiers before them, might have been in control of the heights, but they could not control the surrounding countryside.

The plan devised was simple. Corporal Pearson, one of the fire team commanders, would descend the mountain with three other paratroopers including a sniper. The team would find a suitable firing position, lie up and wait for the armed men to appear. The paratroopers did not seem to consider that setting up road tolls was a centuries-old custom in central Asia and the checkpoint might have been manned by off-duty police or militiamen, as Afghan officials had the custom of setting up checkpoints to harvest an unofficial road tax. The soldiers could have ignored the checkpoint but they were not in a mood to live and let live. The problem of the minefields was apparently raised and discussed with the platoon commander – Sergeant McMellon - and it was decided that the team would use a known track that had reportedly been used previously to ferry supplies to the OP (another account states that the track had been used to set up a trip flare below the OP). What the team seems not to have appreciated was that the track may have been clear of mines but the surrounding ground was not.

By mid-morning Corporal Pearson had prepared his team. Just before mid-day they began their descent of the mountain heading south-west, roughly following the pylon line from the dam further down the slope. The ground fell away steeply at first, then the gradient eased over rocky ground broken by perennial stream beds that cut small gullies across the face of the mountain. Only carrying belt equipment the paratroopers were light on their feet, but they did not get that far. Just 300 metres down from the observation point, crossing a dry stream bed, Lance Corporal Hale stepped on a Russian anti-personnel mine that caused severe injuries to his legs. The sound of the blast echoed across the hills. At almost the same moment the radio which the paratroopers were carrying failed. Stunned by the unexpected mine strike Corporal Pearson shouted for help and fired shots to alert his comrades higher up the mountain. The snipe was now over and the paratroopers had a casualty evacuation on their hands.

The paratroopers should not have strayed into the minefield which was marked on maps as a hatched red circle centred on the western half of the mountain. They had been following a path which was believed to be safe, specifically to avoid the mines. However, the mine marking symbol was not exact; it was an indicative circle drawn on the map to alert of the danger of mines in the area. A knowledgeable reader of the map would have surmised this was the case, for the simple reason that exact marking of an old Russian minefield would have been impossible. Helmand maps showed numerous areas with red hatched circles indicating mined areas. None were exact – they were all indicative. An experienced soldier may also have known that natural erosion causes the phenomenon of mine drift. Whatever the map indicated, caution was required and any area showing mines should be given a wide berth. The paratroopers would later claim they were not in possession of the mapping indicating the mined areas, which raises a question that no protagonist has answered clearly. Mapping made available to the task force did show the minefields. If the detachment did not have this mapping, what maps were they using?

Following the strike, Corporal Pearson had to assume that he and his men were now in the middle of a minefield with a severely injured comrade rapidly losing blood. With no possibility of calling for specialist engineer assistance Corporal Pearson had to clear a path to Lance Corporal Hale himself. Warily, he began to move forward towards his injured colleague prodding for mines. Seeing the unfolding drama from Normandy OP, Corporal Wright, Corporal Craig, and a team of stretcher bearers, made their way down to the minefield to assist. Corporal Wright, described as a ‘fun loving Jock who loved the military and was up for anything and everything’, quickly took charge of the situation.[326] Corporal Pearson in the meantime had inched his way forward to the casualty, apparently realising from the mounds of stones with red and white markers (a local marking system) that they were indeed trapped in the middle of a minefield. No account has explained why the stones were only noticed after the mine was set off. It may be observed that had the paratroopers confessed they had actually seen the marking stones before setting off a mine, it would have cast their actions in a completely different and reckless light.

Over 100 kilometres away and about forty-five minutes after Lance Corporal Hale struck the mine, a Chinook helicopter carrying the Immediate Response Team or IRT, took off from Camp Bastion. The delay in the response was later attributed to confusion over the availability of casevac helicopters. A Blackhawk helicopter with a winch had been requested, but was not available, due to technical difficulties. In his memoirs, Tootal would ascribe the delay to NATO bureaucracy – the requirement for release authorisation.

For unknown reasons, he would make no mention of the technical fault. Even as the Chinook was making its way north to the dam, Corporal Pearson back-tracked along the path he had cleared but stepped on a second mine which destroyed his left leg. Two NCOs were now casualties. Faced with this second casualty Corporal Wright cleared a safe path through the minefield to the injured Corporal Pearson and continued to provide moral support to the injured men.

Reaching the casualties was only half the problem solved. They still had to be pulled out or lifted from the minefield and a landing zone had to be found for the inbound Chinook. These questions were never resolved before the unmistakable clatter of the Chinook rotor blades alerted the men that the IRT was minutes away. Landing a Chinook safely on a gradient at 4,000 feet was never going to be a straightforward proposition, made less so by the threat of mines. With no communications between the stricken paratroopers and the air crew, the pilot took the decision to land about forty metres away to the south of the casualties. What would have followed is speculation – even if the Chinook had waited, how would Corporal Wright have pulled the two casualties safely out of the minefield?

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Recollections of what happened next were contradictory. The Chinook may or may not have actually touched wheels on the ground before being waved away. Some witnesses indicated that the air crew waved the soldiers on, suggesting the aircraft had landed and was waiting for them. As this was happening Corporal Wright attempted to lever himself up from the ground and a third mine detonated (another account states exactly the opposite – that Corporal Wright was crouching down). According to the team medic, Lance Corporal Hartley, it was the downwash from the Chinook that set off the mine. This convenient theory, which pins the blame on the lack of suitable helicopters, fails to explain why, of all the mines in the area, many of which were supposedly closer to the Chinook, it was precisely a mine next to Wright's arm that was set off. This theory was later further elaborated by claims that more than one mine was detonated but nobody at the time reported this, including the RAF loadmaster who may have been a useful witness with his overall view of the scene. Later, it was also claimed that Wright specifically warned not to send a Chinook because of the danger of downdraughts, but there is no evidence supporting this claim.[327] The paratroopers were primarily concerned that a Chinook might set off mines by physically landing on them. They were, after all, in the middle of a minefield or 'in deep shit' as Pearson put it.[328] This, it may be reasonably surmised, is

why the initial request had been for a helicopter with a winch. Whatever caused the detonation, Corporal Wright suffered serious injury to his arm, face and chest. The nearby Corporal Craig was hit by flying shrapnel. There were now four casualties.

The Chinook crew had no realistic option but to return to base – the scene below them was becoming chaotic and there was little they could do to help. Aware that two American Blackhawk HH-60G had finally been released the British IRT could at least take some comfort in the knowledge that help was on its way. In fact, unbeknown to the Chinook crew, the technical problem with the Blackhawks had still not been resolved. It was standard American operating procedures to fly as helicopter two-ships (in pairs). The casevac mission had therefore been aborted until the fault could be identified and rectified. The paratroopers had no certain way of knowing what efforts were being made to rescue them and the 3 Para HQ at Camp Bastion itself was struggling to establish what was happening over confused communications links. With three seriously injured men now lying in the minefield further attempts were made to reach them. Lance Corporal Hartley successfully negotiated a path through the mines by throwing his bergen forward as a sort of improvised mine detonator, then jumping on the cleared ground. He would be awarded the George Cross for this bravery. Fusilier Barlow (a drummer from the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers who had been sent to Normandy OP to make up the numbers) was not so lucky. As he went forward to pick up a bottle of water that had been thrown to alleviate the thirst of the injured men he set off a fourth mine. In the resultant blast, Corporal Wright, Corporal Craig, Lance Corporal Hartley and Private Prosser all received shrapnel. There were now seven casualties. The single surviving junior NCO gave the order for everyone to keep still. They had no choice now but to sit tight and wait for help.

About two and half hours after the first mine strike the Blackhawks arrived at Kajaki to find a scene of disaster. Four soldiers lay maimed in a minefield and another three were injured. Fear and exhaustion had gripped the survivors. Miraculously, no one was dead at this point. The Blackhawks proceeded with the careful business of winching the casualties to the safety. It was a difficult and laborious task. The last casualty finally reached Bastion Camp in the early evening, about five hours after the tragedy had begun to unfold (again, various accounts offer contradictory timings). The eventual tally of dead and injured was shocking. The severely wounded Corporal Mark Wright, who was awarded a posthumous George Cross for his leadership and bravery, died of his wounds en route to Bastion. Corporal Pearson lost his left leg and was awarded the Queen’s Gallantry Medal. Drummer Barlow also lost his left leg and was awarded the George Medal. Lance Corporal Hale suffered an amputation of his right leg. Lance Corporals Craig and Hartley

were both badly injured and Private Prosser had suffered shrapnel wounds to his chest. A single paratrooper had been left standing. No gallantry award was offered by the MOD to the American winchman who risked injury to himself retrieving the stricken paratroopers.

The minefield incident at Kajaki Dam then developed further twists that tarnished the ordeal the men had endured. The first came from Andrew Walker, an Oxford-based coroner who became an early, minor war celebrity and a thorn in the MOD's side. Walker's forthright judgements made for perfect scandals. The fact that there were several contradictory versions of the events of 6 September at Kajaki, and these amounted to conflicting and at least confused witness statements, did not seem to blow his sails off course. In the case of the Kajaki Dam incident some individuals may have been tempted to nuance their statements to support a particular viewpoint. The key charge was that the MOD had failed the troops by not deploying a helicopter equipped with a winch to Afghanistan – a requirement that was judged 'obvious'. What the inquest did not emphasise was that none of the helicopters in southern Afghanistan belonged to the British task force anyway, whether or not they were equipped with a winch. They were all pooled within a combined force that served all ISAF units regardless of nationality. Helicopters with winches were available – the US Blackhawks. The tragedy was that one of the American helicopters developed a technical fault. The whole affair had hinged on a moment of bad luck, which was then compounded by the paratroopers who unluckily set off more mines. None of this could be attributed to a MOD official in Whitehall. Neither was it 'obvious' that helicopters with winches were required. The incident at Kajaki Dam would prove to be a unique event. There was never any subsequent call to rescue soldiers from a minefield, by helicopter, for the remainder of the war.[329] As a last resort a winch was not necessary. Improvised slings, ropes and nets had been used in the past to lift casualties. No matter - the Ministry of Defence should 'hang its head in shame' was his harsh judgement on the Kajaki Dam incident.

For the surviving paratroopers these headline-grabbing verdicts were gratefully received. They were opportunistically suing the MOD for £5 million, for 'breach of duty of care', supported by MPH Solicitors, a firm based in Manchester which specialized in compensation cases for soldiers. The basis of the action was the Ministry's failure to provide 'adequate information and intelligence' – or, as it was reported, mapping showing the assessed minefields.[330] Setting aside the unexplained puzzle over this claim - as available mapping of Kajaki did show the mined areas - this behaviour would have amazed a wartime paratrooper. But these were the modern version, children of Thatcher's

Britain. The hero status the popular press was quick to bestow did not seem to clash with the entrepreneurial spirit with which they sought to cash in on their unlucky experience. In a bizarre twist to this dubious episode, in 2013 it was announced that a film would be made of the Kajaki Dam incident, demonstrating perhaps an enduring British ardour for military disasters, but also the compulsive power of myth-making.

The detachment at Normandy OP had known of the existence of mines. Their existence and general location were common knowledge. Nobody knew the full extent of the minefields, or how far they may have drifted over the years. The British had been warned by US security staff when they first arrived not to stray off the known, safe paths. The paratroopers imprudently *chose* to leave the safety of the OP to snipe at the villagers below – they had received no orders to do so. They could have ignored the locals altogether. But taking personal responsibility for one's actions was not a royal road to compensation claims, so the Ministry was to blame. The paratroopers did have one strong claim - the compensation for injured serviceman had fallen behind the reality of the cost of aftercare and lost earnings. This would be taken up by the media as another example of the government failing to honour 'the Military Covenant'. Alarmed by the political damage being wrought, the government would eventually increase compensation payments for injured servicemen.

Of all the platoon houses the British took over in the summer of 2006, the police station at Musa Qaleh was probably the most claustrophobic and dangerous. Situated in the middle of the town and surrounded on all sides by buildings, it had poor fields of fire and, critically, no obvious landing sight. Over two months, Chinooks were only able to land six times to re-supply this beleaguered outpost.[331] The station included a prison and was situated next to the town's main mosque that would be destroyed by an aerial bomb. The defenders of Musa Qaleh came to be known as 'the Musa Muckers', bonding in the adversity of their long siege. For the hierarchy, Musa Qaleh was always a mistake. General Richards thought it so, as did Brigadier Butler, but both men were trapped by political decision-making that was over-riding military common sense.

When the British arrived, the police station was being run by Police Chief Abdul Wali Koka, known to the British as 'Coco', after the clown. There was in fact nothing clownish about 'Coco'. Police Chief Koka was a great survivor from past wars and he enjoyed local respect – a rarity in Helmand (he was finally caught by a suicide bomber in 2012, but survived with serious head injuries). Importantly, he seemed to know everyone, including the Taliban. 'Coco' was as much a part of the circle of power-brokers in Musa Qaleh as

the Akhundzadas. He never undercut the British although he could be a very frustrating person to work with when pursuing his own vendettas.

The town he reigned over was smaller than Sangin and home to perhaps 10,000 inhabitants. Musa Qaleh meant ‘Moses’ place’ or ‘settlement’, and the original village had grown on the east bank of a river by the same name, just north of a wadi formed by a tributary named Baghni River. For most of the year, the Musa Qaleh River was fordable to vehicles and the British would use its pebble bed as a bridge to their base. There was a single north-south running bazaar road that ended on a roundabout with a minaret. This minaret was the only distinctive structure in the town and a source of some local pride. The bazaar road forked west at the minaret leading to the river, 400 metres further down the track. This was where the district centre would eventually be located near an unfinished two storey brick building, which the soldiers would nickname ‘the Hotel’. Like the FSG Tower at Sangin, the British would occupy and fortify this building, abandoning the police station in the middle of the town. To the north of the district centre, near the banks of the river, was Musa Qaleh’s ‘hospital’, a white-washed building offering basic medical care. The river beach that ran north from the district centre to the hospital filled with market stalls on Thursdays. South of the district centre the ground was covered in orchards, commonly frequented by children minding livestock. The town also boasted a dentist and a school, which the Taliban would close when they took over the town.

There were two other notable features at Musa Qaleh. West of the river, and just two kilometres north of the town a Roshan communications tower had been erected on a steep hill with a cliff wall on the eastern face. It was a perfect defensive position that offered panoramic views across Musa Qaleh and the surrounding countryside. The Russians had once occupied the hill and the British would eventually follow. The other notable feature was a 1,647 metre conical mountain that rose out of the desert plain, eight kilometres north of the town, on the east side of the river. The local name for the peak was Kuh-e Musa Qaleh. The British nicknamed it ‘Mount Doom’ and used it as a navigational aid. The real value of Musa Qaleh however did not lie in the town itself, which was little more than an over-grown market, but in the patchwork of farms extending north and south of the town which bloomed pink every year with the poppy crop. This was the source of the town’s wealth as well as the source of rivalries and violent turf wars.

The first British force sent to Musa Qaleh was the Pathfinder Platoon whose role within the 3 Para battlegroup was to act as long-range reconnaissance force. This role was completely compromised by the Musa Qaleh deployment. They arrived on 14 June to take

over from a small American force with instructions that they would only spend a matter of days in the town. Their stay eventually lasted fifty-two days, during which time they were under attack on twenty-six of those days. At one point they ran out of food and they frequently ran very low on ammunition. As in Now Zad and Sangin, it was the foreign soldiers, not locals, who caused the problem.

The fighting erupted after an American convoy transiting through Musa Qaleh at the end of June was shot at. The Americans responded to this attack with overwhelming force, with one paratrooper described as resembling a scene from Apocalypse Now.[332] As in other locations in Helmand, the British were paying the price for an aggressive American ethos that created an unbridgeable gap between the locals and Western soldiers. For the Pathfinders, later reinforced by 6 Platoon from B Company, holding the police station became a grim and dangerous business. Enemy mortar and rocket fire proved very accurate, far more accurate than that experienced at any of the other district centres and raising suspicions that Pakistani instructors were coaching the locals. The enemy mortar men had found their range, successfully landing over ninety mortar bombs within the compound and eventually wounding fourteen of the defenders with shrapnel and splinters.[333] Every casualty was an evacuation headache as it meant risking a helicopter to extract the casualty. As in Sangin, the British responded with mortar and artillery fire (from an American battery) as well as aerial bombs, with similar destructive effects on the town centre. It was an indication of the heaviness of fighting that a Royal Irish mortar platoon deployed to reinforce Musa Qaleh would fire off a quarter of all mortars bombs expended on Operation Herrick 4 (851).[334]

Anxious to support the beleaguered Pathfinders a relief was attempted on 6 July (Operation Ketab), which failed in the face of withering fire and multiple ambushes. A second attempt mounted on the following day also failed. Faced with such stiff opposition the battlegroup drew back and prepared a major operation to reach the paratroopers. On 21 July, with the relief force in place west of the town, a third attempt was made to relieve the police station, supported by a Danish reconnaissance squadron mounted on Eagle APCs. This too was beaten back. The failure of these relief operations sunk morale within the base but the defenders had little option but to hold on until help arrived. On 24 July, perhaps emboldened by the parlous state of the besieged force, local fighters mounted their strongest attack to date and managed to destroy one the sentry positions. This proved to be a turning point. Exhausted by their attacks it was now the turn of the locals to draw breath. On 26 July the Danes finally got through to the immense relief of the dirty,

bearded paratroopers who had not seen a friendly face for almost two months. This was still not the end for the Pathfinders who would have to wait another eleven days before their British replacements arrived. At least they were now in little danger of being over-run - the Danish contingent brought with them six precious heavy machine guns, as well as a rare female machine gunner called Anna, who became known to the British troops as ‘Combat Barbie’.

Judging that the outpost still faced a severe threat, the recently arrived D Squadron HCR was subsequently ordered to deploy to the town on 1 August. This was a challenge as the CVR(T) vehicles on which the squadron was mounted were very old and prone to breakdowns (the troopers self-deprecatingly referred to themselves as ‘the Antiques Road Show’, such was the lack of faith in their machines).[335] The deployment, which was undertaken in haste and with no infantry support turned into a fiasco. Approaching the outskirts of the town, the squadron was caught in a well-executed ambush. One of the vehicles – a Spartan command vehicle – ran over a large IED killing three of the occupants and severely burning the driver (who would subsequently be invited to the wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton in the spring of 2011). A second vehicle, a Scimitar, was also lost in the gun battle. It was only the actions of Corporal of the Horse Mick Flynn, a forty-six year old Falklands veteran that saved the day.[336] Under accurate fire and forced to abandon his own Scimitar after receiving several RPG strikes, Flynn rallied the survivors and organised the rescue of the burned and unconscious Spartan driver. For this bravery he was awarded a Military Cross. On this occasion the villagers had clearly won the contest and D Squadron was forced to abandon the mission and return to Camp Bastion.

The Danish reinforcement was greatly welcomed but proved to be short-lived. When the conditions at Musa Qaleh became apparent to Danish policy-makers, a decision was taken to withdraw the force. For the British this was a body blow which they could do little about. Every nation committed to the ISAF mission had the right to fall back on national caveats. For the Danes, the isolation of the base at Musa Qaleh, and in particular the difficulties of carrying out casualty evacuation, were simply unacceptable. The British had raised exactly the same concerns but British policy-makers could not, or would not, stand up to American pressure to remain in Musa Qaleh.

Tootal in the meantime had to mount a fifth relief operation in as many weeks to finally withdraw the Pathfinders. On 6 August, Operation Mar Chichel (‘Snakebite’) kicked off involving more than 500 British troops with the aim of flushing away the gunmen from

Musa Qaleh.[337] By now, knowledge of the ground had greatly improved and the British had a much better idea of the likely enemy firing points. With the Royal Irish Somme Platoon and mortars securing the dry river bed west of the town, B and C Companies conducted an air assault into Musa Qaleh. To intimidate the locals, Canadian LAVs provided fire support and created an armoured corridor to the police station.[338] In a pattern that would become familiar to British troops, the enemy, faced with these overwhelming odds, melted away after a brief gun battle, but not before catching out a resupply column and killing a soldier from 13 Air Assault Support Regiment with a roadside bomb. The entire operation was undertaken in searing temperatures with the thermometer hitting 47 degrees centigrade. Sapped by this inhuman heat, body armour was shed at local commanders' discretions. To avoid ambushes the paratroopers found themselves having to blast their way through the thick compound walls using demolition charges. In less than a day, the town was cleared leaving the paratroopers in command of a battered and largely deserted landscape. As a relief operation, Mar Chichel was a success. There were now close to 170 men in the base - but this would make them even more vulnerable to casualties.[339]

The idea of pulling out of Musa Qaleh was not the first time the British had considered withdrawing from a district centre. By mid-July it was increasingly obvious to everyone, from Brigadier Ed Butler downwards, that the task force had taken on too many tasks and was dangerously and unsustainably stretched, even with the reinforcements from 2 RRF. On 22 July 3 Para had offered to withdraw from Now Zad (an offer that the pressed Gurkhas would gladly have supported), but this was rejected on the grounds that it would mean a loss of face. The same argument was consistently used to justify the continued presence in Musa Qaleh even though with each passing week the British toehold in this northern town was becoming increasingly untenable. The Danes, unimpressed by such arguments, did withdraw leaving behind an ad hoc collection of Royal Irish and paratroopers known as Easy Company.

The biggest fear that preyed on Butler was the consequences to the campaign if the Taliban succeeded in shooting down one of the Chinooks. At Musa Qaleh, due to the location of the only available landing site, this was no longer a possibility – it was becoming a probability. The risks taken by the Chinook crews of Flight 1310 on the first Operation Herrick deployment were extremely high. By the end of the deployment 18 Squadron would receive more gallantry awards than any RAF squadron since the end of the Second World War. American aviators had the experience of Vietnam where hundreds

of helicopters were lost to enemy fire (almost 10 per cent of American fatalities in this war were helicopter crews), but no British helicopter pilots had ever had to operate under such a sustained hostile environment. Flying conditions were appalling due to dust 'brown outs', even without the risk of enemy fire. Navy pilot Nichol Benzie offered just one example of the risks daily undertaken by the Chinook crews. As he recalled, he was attacked regularly and heavily on most missions. On one occasion, his helicopter was attacked by seven separate machine gun posts.[340] Later it was discovered his machine had been hit extensively, fortunately missing vital components. The experiences of Major Mark Hammond, a marine on secondment who was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and later wrote a book, were typical of the hazardous flying conditions endured by the Chinook crews. On 6 September Major Hammond undertook three casevac missions, all under fire, in Sangin and Musa Qaleh. In one of these missions his helicopter was hit by machine gun fire and he narrowly escaped being downed by an RPG. Undeterred, he returned with a fresh helicopter and successfully evacuated the casualties.

If conditions in Musa Qaleh police station were becoming intolerable for the defenders, they were equally bad for the civilian population witnessing the destruction of what was previously a thriving market town. Over the course of September, I Battery 7 RHA reckoned they had expended over 2,300 artillery shells and over 270 bombs had been dropped (including seventy 2,000 pound bombs!) over northern Helmand. Finally, on 13 September, after two months of fighting and secret three-way negotiations between London, Kabul and Lashkar Gah, a ceasefire was finally declared at Musa Qaleh, brokered by Haji Shah Agha, a tribal elder. This was an enormous relief to the British who had been struggling to find a way out of the military and political impasse. The siege was finally over but the deal provoked great controversy. Butler, who had been pressing for a withdrawal, came close to taking the unilateral decision himself. This seemed to jolt PJHQ, as well as raise eyebrows. The newly arrived General Richards also wanted an exit but argued that it had to be managed within an acceptable political framework. Under the terms of the ceasefire it was agreed the gunmen would stop interfering in Musa Qaleh in return for a British withdrawal. Both sides would save face, and both sides would be able to claim a victory of sorts. The Americans, naturally, were unhappy about the deal and saw British 'softness' in these machinations. In the US Congress, the Musa Qaleh deal was openly described as a British 'disaster'. London flapped but could do nothing to alter the perception of a British retreat. About the only people who were unequivocally happy with the deal were the soldiers of Easy Company who were at the end of their tether. Three Royal Irishmen had been killed and seventeen wounded in northern Helmand – one third

of the force that deployed. The Taliban also celebrated and filmed the final British withdrawal for propaganda purposes.

There was still one more obstacle to overcome and this was actually vacating the police station. After much bartering, the British eventually left in a convoy of colourful Afghan trucks on 17 October, escorted by the town elders. Both Richards and Butler would commend Musa Qaleh as an example of the way forward and it well might have been. Whatever the misgivings of the critics, this was undeniably 'an Afghan solution to an Afghan problem'. Kabul also applauded the deal for this reason. Perhaps the most candid assessment of the whole business came from one of the members of Easy Company, Ranger Devine, quoted in James Fergusson's incisive account of Operation Herrick 4, *A Million Bullets*. The whole business had been pointless, he opined. All that happened was that the town was destroyed and the Taliban eventually moved in.[341]

The real problem with the Musa Qaleh deal was that it was followed by a vacuum of Western commitment to the town, and it was subsequently undermined by what in Taliban eyes was unprovoked American aggression. On 4 February in the following year, an air strike just outside Musa Qaleh killed Mullah Ibrahim, the brother of the prominent Taliban leader Mullah Ghafoor. Taking this act as a violation of the ceasefire agreement, Mullah Ghafoor rode into Musa Qaleh with a 300 strong militia and after a brief struggle with the elders, effectively appointed himself as governor of the town. The police simply left at the behest of the Taliban. Mullah Ghafoor's personal victory was short-lived as two weeks later he in turn was killed in an air strike. Musa Qaleh however remained in the hands of the insurgents. Colonel Tom Collins, the ISAF spokesman, responded to the loss of Musa Qaleh warning: 'It is only a matter of time before the government re-establishes control.' In fact it would take eleven months to restore government control during which time Musa Qaleh would become a narco-town with the Alizai tribesmen, in tacit collusion with the Taliban, enjoying a bonanza in the opium trade.

As 3 Para prepared to handover to 3 Commando Brigade at the beginning of September they had much to reflect on since suffering their first fatality in mid-June. There had been nearly 500 contacts with the enemy. The battlegroup had expended 480,000 small arms rounds – a phenomenal ammunition expenditure rate when it is understood that the fighting was largely confined to a handful of besieged outposts. 'Bull's Troop', the gunners supporting 3 Para, fired over 200 missions amounting to a daily expenditure rate of about forty shells.[342] The artillery fire had been boosted by the expenditure of over 3,000 mortar bombs. It was hardly surprising that quarters of Now Zad, Sangin and Musa

Qaleh were reduced to rubble. The Apaches experienced teething problems in their first blooding and only loosed off around 4,500 cannon rounds and half a dozen Hellfire missiles. The first British soldier to receive support fire from an Apache turned out to be a Gurkha – Rifleman Rupendra Rai. The helicopters did nonetheless prove their usefulness on the battlefield and quickly earned the nickname 'the mosquitoes' from the Taliban.

The battlegroup had suffered fifteen dead and forty-six wounded – casualty figures that had not been experienced by the Parachute Regiment since the Falklands Conflict. An enemy body count of 700 was claimed, but this was an inflated figure. Nobody was recovering bodies; the paratroopers mostly hunkered behind sandbags firing off thousands of rounds at invisible enemy behind walls. As a Taliban commander would later observe to a British newspaper journalist: 'Very soon NATO will kill all the Afghans with their casualty numbers.'[343] The claims were simply not believable.

These statistics were really only the footnotes to an unpalatable truth: Operation Herrick 4 had been a fiasco. First, it was clear to all those who had taken part in the fighting over the summer that the operational plan did not match reality. The staff-perfect, jargon-laden, Helmand Plan had gone up in smoke. It was not written about Helmand – a place the British knew very little about – it was written about an abstract, euphemistic world of 'lines of development', 'multi-partner engagements' and 'expanding development zones'. 16 Air Assault Brigade's own assessment of the status of the operation was nothing if not honest. The intelligence had been woeful; the communications simply inadequate for the distances involved; the reconstruction plan a fantasy manned by phantom staff; and the Afghan National Army a force that would not be ready for independent operations for a number of years. There had been serious operational and tactical errors.

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The campaign was lost over five crucial weeks, between the last week of April and the end of May. Over this period, John Reid handed over to his successor Des Browne and the former's crucial instruction that the mission not be expanded beyond its original remit was lost. A new CDS, Air Chief Marshall Jock Stirrup, took up office in the last week of April. At PJHQ the key post of Chief of Joint Operations was handed over to General Nick Houghton who had just returned from Iraq and whose focus inevitably returned to that country. The two senior officers that could have saved the mission were not in the ring - General Richards was still waiting to assume command at the end of July, and Brigadier Butler was marginalised in Kabul and Kandahar, as well as by awful command and control

arrangements. Four high level visitors arrived in Helmand – Richards, Dannatt, Wall and Browne – but none was sufficiently alarmed to intervene. The key British government departments, the FCO and DfID, played weak and sometimes unhelpful roles. Margaret Beckett was appointed Foreign Secretary on 5 May, lasted one year, and was conspicuous by her absence and lack of engagement in Afghanistan. The British Embassy did not appear to engage at all in the unfolding disaster in Helmand. Hilary Benn, the International Development Secretary, visited Kabul once. When later pressed by the opposition to explain exactly what Britain had achieved with a reported expenditure of £400 million of aid in Afghanistan, he gave the astonishing reply that the 'information is not available and to obtain it would incur a disproportionate cost', a most arrogant *de haut en bas* put-down by a left-wing politician to British tax payers.[344] In Helmand, Governor Daoud was panicking and in Kandahar General Freakley was fretting over British lack of fight. Karzai did not help matters. The British Prime Minister was battling to save his reputation from the fallout of the invasion of Iraq. A more toxic combination of characters and circumstances would be hard to imagine.

In his classic study *Low Intensity Operations*, General Frank Kitson (like Ed Butler, a Royal Green Jacket) set out the essential tasks in a counter-insurgency war. First, establish the civil-military partnership, with the emphasis on civil affairs. Second, start gathering information. Third, begin psychological operations, known as information or influence operations in modern parlance. And lastly, take military action. Operation Herrick 4 had turned this paradigm on its head. In one generation, the priceless lessons of Britain's most successful modern counter-insurgent had been entirely forgotten. Kitson also made the not dishonest observation that in the past the British Army had made up for its clumsiness by weight of numbers. This was a luxury no longer afforded to the modern army.

To add to their difficulties, the 3 Para battlegroup had been let down by a penny-pinching Labour government. To Lieutenant Colonel Tootal's great frustration, very few of the urgent equipment requests had actually reached the troops. A disenchanted officer subsequently leaked on the Army's unofficial website, ARRSE, a classified document that suggested why. The Treasury had been reluctant to fund Urgent Operational Requirements (UORs) for Operation Herrick and had imposed a delay on the release of funds.[345] Analysis by the defence specialists *Jane's* argued as much: in key areas such as helicopters, UAVs and armoured vehicles, Geoff Hoon, then Defence Minister, had either cancelled or delayed vital programs as far back as 2004 on instructions from the Treasury. The most damning example was a decision to delay the procurement of eighty support and

transport helicopters by a decade.[346] That military officers agreed to this, an argument made by Jack Fairweather, does not diminish the Treasury's role. George Bernard Shaw's often-quoted quip that 'the British soldier can stand up to anything except the British War Office' seemed to be repeating itself. Within a year the government would not dare act in such a miserly fashion towards frontline soldiers.

There had been no credible counter-narcotics policy – a scandalous failure given that Britain had volunteered to lead in counter-narcotics within ISAF. In 2006 total opium income for farmers in Helmand amounted to an estimated $528 million, or roughly five hundred times the sum of aid money offered by DfID in Helmand. It was not hard to guess where the farmers were betting their futures. There had been no reconstruction – so DfID would claim - because there had been no security, although the department would later have to abandon this excuse for inaction. The first British task force to Helmand had failed to undertake a single reconstruction and development project. 3 Para proposed twenty-seven Quick Impact Projects and not one of them was started. Tootal was insultingly funded with $250 per month for such projects, and even this derisory sum was taken away from him by DfID before the deployment concluded. To put this in perspective, by 2009 American CERPs funds (funds given directly to military commanders to finance reconstruction projects) amounted to $1.2 billion.[347] Destruction had taken the place of reconstruction and this violence was reflected in the Queen's New Year's honours list: a total of seventy-seven awards were received for gallantry and distinguished service.

It would have taken great moral courage and imagination to stop the clock and re-think the strategy. These were not qualities that were absent in senior British officers. Certainly Brigadier Butler did not lack moral courage. But the campaign – or war more properly – had gained that quality that all wars gain very quickly, momentum. The unstoppable train of the next rotation could not be halted by the inconvenient fact of failure. The failure would have to be deepened before the strategy was re-thought. Remarkably, for the next three years, every succeeding brigadier inherited the original campaign plan, largely unchanged. The only thing to do was to go on. Waiting for Godot was hardly a worthwhile strategy, but in the absence of a campaign director, this was what the British did.

The Task Force took decisions – against the uncertain panorama in which it found itself – which would have enduring consequences on every succeeding brigade. The district centres at Musa Qaleh, Now Zad and Sangin had been bitterly contested for no measurable reward. The conclusion drawn from this stalemate was not that British troops should withdraw from the district centres – as they ultimately would from Basra in Iraq – but

rather that these buildings held iconic status and should be defended at all costs. To pull out would be to concede defeat. No matter that these might become urban Alamos – as in fact they became – the point was to demonstrate that the symbol of lawful authority in each of these towns was occupied by ISAF and its Afghan allies, and not by gun-toting bandits from the surrounding countryside. Having established security, reconstruction, it was argued, would surely follow. Three years later, a patrol leaving the District Centre in Sangin to walk 800 metres to a satellite patrol base could take as long as twenty-four hours - such was the level of threat and hostility to British troops in some district centres. Whatever else was being achieved, neither security nor reconstruction was on the list.

The second important decision taken by the Task Force was that the British presence in Helmand had to be extended beyond the originally agreed Afghan Development Zone centred on Lashkar Gah and Gereshk. This meant more forward operating bases and it was not an independent decision. ISAF mandated a 'widening' of the mission so in a sense the British task force was merely following an already agreed strategy. The question was: what did 'presence' on the ground actually mean? Did it necessarily and literally mean more bases? As would become evident with the deployment of 3 Commando Brigade in the winter, there was another interpretation to 'presence'. This was manoeuvre. The thin red line could not be everywhere.

In the end, all the Task Force managed to do was buy time for an unpopular governor, while constantly running the risk of running out of resources, faced by a resourceful enemy and suspicious civilian population. Brigadier Butler was clear that 'an Afghan solution to Afghan problems' was required – a mantra that would be repeated tirelessly by future commanders - but there was a near complete absence of Afghan solutions, just the problems. And buying time raised difficult questions. At what human cost? For just how long was a British government prepared to buy time for a bunch of venal local politicians, narcos, petty tribal leaders and outright criminals?

Despite this disastrous start, Brigadier Butler did not view Operation Herrick 4 as a complete failure. In his view there was always going to be a fight and it would have been naïve to think otherwise. The fight – when it erupted - had been contained away from the two main population centres of Lashkar Gah and Gereshk. Highway 1 had become a de facto front line. The Taliban had been given a bloody nose and 'footprints' had been established. The Musa Qaleh deal had been a good deal and possibly offered a blueprint for the future. These arguments supported what became the mythology of Operation Herrick 4 – namely that the British had engaged in the necessary 'break-in' battle, laying

foundations for future brigades to secure and develop Helmand. This reasoning was summarised by a returning officer who argued that it had been a particularly difficult operation, but the battlegroup had always expected a fight, and reconstruction would follow the spread of security.[348]

The truth – at least to the media – was that the British deployment had been naïve and almost reckless. If policy makers had really anticipated a fight, why wasn't a larger and better equipped force deployed in the first place? Why was the small Task Force allowed to be dispersed and besieged in the 'platoon houses'? Why were there not enough helicopters? At the end of the war, the under-resourcing of Operation Herrick 4 became an often-repeated *mea culpa* from now retired senior officers, but this was a complete red herring. The reason why 3 Para got into difficulties was because it became unwisely embroiled in unnecessary spats with the tribes of northern Helmand. It would have made not an iota of difference if twice as many soldiers had been sent. More soldiers would have just spread and exacerbated the fighting, as happened over the succeeding years.

If the army created its own 'break-in battle' myth over Operation Herrick 4, critics also created counter-myths. The core myth was that the army had deliberately manufactured the war. This had several sub-plots. The first was that the army went to war in Afghanistan to redeem itself from the failures in Basra. As described in the previous chapter, all the Helmand decisions were taken over a period when the British Army did not feel it was failing on Operation Telic, or that it needed to redeem itself. This was the conspiracy theory that a 'good war' was sought to make up for the 'bad war' in Iraq. A sense of redemption did grow but it had no special bearing on decisions taken in Afghanistan, which was its own war. The second was that the army feared further defence cuts. At the time, the army was working through the FAS cuts (2003-2006). There were no other cuts on the horizon. Unless senior British officers were gifted with foresight available to nobody else, this does not sound credible. Did General Mike Jackson really anticipate the 2008 global credit crisis and subsequent 2010 defence cuts? A variant of this sub-plot implicated the Apache helicopters. This had two strands: the helicopters were deployed to save them from cuts, and their very deployment created the conditions for aggressive British operations. Neither argument stands. The Apache had only just been declared in service. Cutting the Apache fleet was simply not a consideration. The handful that were deployed had limited flying hours, so limited that Treasury dispensation had to be sought to increase their hours. Their impact was not great, as we have seen. What made aggressive British operations possible and what saved the British 'platoon houses' was

American air power, coupled with the stubborn resistance of the defenders. Every platoon house became a Khe Sanh in miniature.

The last myth was that the British Army sought its ‘Falklands moment’. Again, this does not stand scrutiny. Since the end of the Second World War, successive British governments have demonstrated they are remarkably unsentimental if not insensitive over chopping famous regimental names, ships or squadrons. The ‘Falklands moment’, in the end, did not save the navy. The only exception to this rule has been the monarch’s Household Division which no commoner has dared touch over the centuries. Charles II, no doubt, is still smiling. If Britain’s senior army officers were counting on saving their regiments by going to war – a wild allegation – they were disregarding this history. Indeed, they were disregarding their own life experience. This was a generation of senior officers that had joined proud and large armed forces. Over the course of their lifetime’s service they had witnessed these forces shrivel in peace and in war.

It is difficult not to sympathise with Ed Butler. Cut off from his brigade and trying to make sense of an uncontrolled situation, he fell back on a narrative that gave some justification for the sacrifice his men made. Neither could blame be laid on Tootal. He was neither pawn nor fool but rather like his superior officer, a servant trying to do his duty to his paratroopers and to wayward masters. Of all the characters that bestrode the stage of Operation Herrick 4, Tootal undoubtedly stood tallest.

Butler bequeathed two important lessons to his successor. The first was this was an Afghan war that Afghans should fight, not the British. The second was that the British task force had become static and fixed. Unfixing the force had to be managed as a matter of urgency. In Tootal’s phrase, the British had to become ‘dynamically unpredictable’. This task would fall to the marines.

CHAPTER 4
UNFIX THE FORCE
Operation HERRICK 5
5 October 2006 – March 2007

Brigadier Jerry Thomas, the commander of 3 Commando Brigade, inherited a situation in Helmand that would not be repeated. There was no fighting in the province's two principal towns, Lashkar Gah and Gereshk. A truce had been negotiated in Now Zad. Another truce was called in Sangin, which would hold intermittently almost until the end of the brigade's tour. The British had withdrawn from Musa Qaleh and the town had been handed over to the elders. Only in the lawless north at Kajaki, and in the equally lawless south, in Garmsir, were the British facing an openly confrontational situation.

The chance to seek some sort of province-wide deal to capitalise on these truces and to restore calm was never pursued. London was still shell-shocked by the events of the summer. Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett was mired in negotiating a withdrawal from Iraq and paying insufficient attention to the supposed reconstruction operation in Afghanistan. Defence Secretary Des Browne was still struggling to get to grips with his portfolio. In Kabul, the British ambassador was about to be replaced. At Northwood, PJHQ was creaking under the pressure of running two wars.

In the army's own historical study of its long campaign in Northern Ireland a conclusion was drawn that:

'The initial period after the arrival of a military force in a peace support or peace enforcement operation has been described as the 'honeymoon period'. That suggests that there is a period (variously given as 100 days or three months) in which to put things right. The term 'honeymoon period' is a misnomer. *It is not a honeymoon. It is the most important phase of the campaign.*'[349]

That honeymoon period had been botched, but there was still a chance, in the autumn of 2006, to recover the situation.

In Afghanistan, nobody took responsibility for the campaign.[350] One of the lamentable features of the war was the manner in which labyrinthine and diffuse political and military command relationships abrogated commanders of ultimate responsibility, inhibiting anyone from showing leadership and seizing the war by the scruff of the neck, which it needed. It would take an American general, Stanley McChrystal, to demonstrate that leadership, but by the time he arrived in 2009, the ISAF mission had already spiralled out of control. In Helmand, the governor should have led the political process but he proved weak and panicky. The sacked Akhunzada, who could have rallied the tribes, must have gloated at the chaos caused by his dismissal. Karzai, whose national leadership was provoking questions, never visited the province. The ISAF regional and national commanders were busy ‘running the war’. British diplomacy was ineffectual. The notion of striking peace deals was not even on the cards.

Thomas was an almost perfect fit for the war in Helmand. Youthful and with a wide boyish grin, he epitomised the stereotype of the marine as ‘thinking man’s soldier’. One of a dwindling number of Falkland’s veterans, Thomas had subsequently alternated between command and intelligence posts. It was the experience he gained in the latter appointments that provided him with firm foundations for tackling the insurgency in Helmand. Intelligence is central to counter-insurgency wars and Thomas understood this intuitively. Indeed, the marines began to talk of Operation Herrick as an ‘Information Operation’ first, so struck were they by a near absence of reliable, ground truth intelligence. Of all the brigadiers that served in Helmand - along with Brigadier Andrew McKay, but for different reasons - Thomas held the most distinctive views on how to run a counter-insurgency war. This vision was not taken up. The winter of 2006 marked the single window when the British might have adopted a mobile warfare approach to the insurgency. After this period, it became a static, slugging campaign of attrition.

Britain’s armed forces adopted a ‘manoeuvrist approach to warfare’ in the early 1990s. This doctrine had earlier political origins in the shenanigans surrounding the controversial Nott defence cuts of 1981. With some craftiness, Lieutenant General Nigel Bagnall, Commander of 1 (British) Corps in West Germany, bamboozled Nott by pulling a rabbit out of the hat in the form of a ‘new’ doctrine of manoeuvre warfare. This demanded significant re-organisation of the Army on the Rhine - as Nott demanded - but averted the worst cuts. Even so, the army was forced to make some sacrifices. To placate critics - the Conservatives had come to power by successfully portraying Labour as weak on defence - Nott simultaneously announced that the size of the Territorial Army would be increased, a

tactic that would be repeated by another Conservative Defence Secretary in 2011.

In fact, as with virtually all British Army doctrine in the modern period, this rediscovered enthusiasm for manoeuvre warfare followed the lead of the newly-promulgated US Army doctrine of 'maneuver warfare' (notably in General William DePuy's 1976 Field Manual 100-5 *Operations* which gained iconic status, much like General Petraeus's counter-insurgency manual would gain favour in the modern period). In the British Army, the concept of manoeuvre warfare had a very specific meaning. In *Design for Military Operations - The British Military Doctrine* (1989) – the first formal statement of British military doctrine in the modern era – manoeuvre warfare was promoted because, '…it enables a small force [the British Army] to a engage a larger one [the Soviet Army] with some chance of success instead of being forced into a battle of attrition it could not sustain'. The model was in fact Operation Goodwood (1944) in which a smaller, agile German force held off and inflicted heavy losses on a British armoured division. This battle was studied by post-war generations of staff college students (and still is), and was hugely influential in shaping British ideas on land battles.

In the 1989 pamphlet, the phrase 'the manoeuvrist approach' does not appear. Neither can a reader find any of the later accreted meanings which the original authors of manoeuvre warfare never intended. This elaboration of a simple idea – the switch from manoeuvre warfare to 'the manoeuvrist approach', a quite different idea - came later, following the first Gulf War, along with a wave of military theory books peddling the 'Revolution in Military Affairs'. In this respect, military doctrine seemed to follow the same fatuous cycles of faddish business literature with short lifespans and promises of instant success. In the end, for the army, as for the other two services, the new doctrine only offered a short stay of execution before the Treasury demanded a head on the plate (*Options for Change*, 1991).

The ugly term 'manoeuvrism' became the army's credo and its maxims were learnt by a modern generation of officers, but there was nothing new in the idea. The manouevrist approach – as it was coined in the 1990s - was ultimately rooted in Basil Liddell Hart's 'indirect approach', a somewhat dubious concept some critics have argued, which appeared in *The British Way in Warfare* (1932). In the Second World War it became conflated with *blitzkrieg*, the Wermacht's 'lightning war' in Europe, partly thanks to Hart who was keen to claim a stake in the success of the German generals and poke a pig stick at the British generals who had not heeded his wisdom, as he saw it. Most infamously, he persuaded Heinz Guderian to include in the foreword to the English translation of *Panzer*

Leader, his wartime memoirs, an acknowledgment of Hart's ideas. Many fell for this trickery and self-promotion, cementing Hart's reputation as military genius and prophet.

The 'indirect approach' actually came about because Hart was failing to make any headway with the military establishment with his somewhat irritatingly direct and confrontational approach. This is what provided him with the Eureka moment of trying an indirect approach, which he then turned into a life philosophy (even suggesting that this approach was apposite in matters of sex). He was still tinkering with these eccentric ideas almost to his deathbed. Not a man easily put off by rejection, Hart would eventually author forty-two military theory books, but the crowning irony of his record output is that it is very hard to find any evidence of Hartisms in British military practice – even after the indirect approach was adopted following his death, but now transformed as the doctrine of the 'manoeuvrist approach'.

This adoption completely ignored what Hart actually meant. Which army officer was behind this promotion of Hart remains unknown (the individual, whoever he was, will now be retired). In the MOD Main Building library there is a heavily annotated book on Hart, with many notes and jottings in the margins. It can only be speculated but perhaps this book was the origin of the ideas of the mystery author of the 'manoeuvrist approach'. Whatever the case, the crux of the 'indirect approach' was an implicit criticism of contemporary politicians and generals. In the past, Hart argued, Britain, had won her wars by paradoxically getting others to fight them, by giving 'sovereigns to sovereigns'; or by attacking 'indirectly', by which he meant fighting anywhere but continental Europe and trusting in the Royal Navy. In many respects, Hart was an eccentric futurologist trapped inside the mind of an 18th century Whig parliamentarian. Perhaps the most dubious Hartism was the notion that an indirect approach meant mysteriously 'influencing' your enemy to quit fighting without firing a shot, a barb which he used to criticise the attrition warfare of the Great War generals who had plainly fired many millions of shots to little effect. In the modern period, some found this a rather useful philosophy when one no longer had actual soldiers to effect that persuasion with force. Regardless, there was an irony that when faced with a real war, the British Army abandoned the 'manoeuvrist approach' – whatever it really meant, or what serving officers imagined it meant. Task Force Helmand became a fixed, static and dispersed force mired in attrition warfare – the very opposite of the 'manoeuvrist approach'.

Whether or not Thomas consciously followed 'manoeuvrism' or was simply acting from pragmatic common sense, his brigade followed three simple principles: do not hold

ground, do not get fixed, and remain mobile. For Thomas, ‘manoeuvrism’ meant mobile warfare, in the classic sense, stripped of the many additional meanings that were added by military doctrine authors in the 1990s. Follow, in other words, the hard-won lesson of his predecessors and become ‘dynamically unpredictable’. 3 Commando Brigade in 2006-2007 would be the *only* British brigade to divide the campaign map into a series of manoeuvre boxes – every other brigade would carve up Helmand into static, battlegroup areas. Planting troops, like Roman legionnaires in isolated posts to ward off the barbarians, was not serving great purpose. Rather it was leading to petty squabbles in the ‘Green Zone’ (the fertile Helmand river valley).

It was Thomas who coined the phrase ‘courageous inactivity’, three years before McChrystal coined the more famous phrase ‘courageous restraint’.[351] He understood that every needless bullet only served to stir the pond more. All tactical engagements favoured the enemy, whether or not the marines were able to give the gunmen a bloody nose, for the simple reason that every punch-up created further unrest and the impression of an ungovernable province. Killing the enemy could be entirely counter-productive as every dead tribesman created another ten seeking revenge. The wisdom of this Royal Marine was not heeded by army successors. One of his subordinates, Lieutenant Colonel Holmes, the commanding officer of 42 Commando, put it quite plainly. Body counts were pointless, he argued. The pool of available fighters was endless. If Task Force Helmand pursued an aggressive approach, it would only lead to strategic failure.[352]

Thomas’ brigade was the first and last to view the war through this lens.[353] From the spring of 2007, collating enemy kill statistics – so reminiscent of the Vietnam body counts – became a feature of the campaign. However, this did not imply a defensive outlook on the part of the marines. 3 Commando Brigade would act in aggressive ways, although Thomas did not, at first, seek confrontation. There was no patrolling, as Holmes later observed just for the sake of showing ‘presence’.[354] Like Butler, he strongly argued this was an Afghan war that should be fought by Afghans. He also understood that the imposition of Western paradigms would never succeed in Afghanistan, but convincing others of this key point proved his biggest challenge. His brigade operations officer, a Major Lee, observed that Afghans simply did not conform to Western ideas and any attempts to impose such ideas on them should be resisted.[355] Afghan solutions had to be found to Afghan problems. This advice was also disregarded, particularly by the PRT and the civilians that set about imposing Western constructs on Helmandis.

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Thomas arrived with a plan that was eminently sensible. 3 Commando Brigade would focus on development in the original ADZ (Afghan Development Zone) between Lashkar Gah and Gereshk. After all, this was the plan the British were supposed to be following. Concurrently, he would use mobile forces to interdict and keep off balance insurgents in the north and south of the province. Lastly, he would train up the ANA and ANP, a task which the predecessor brigade neglected and then was unable to address because it got caught up in the 'platoon house' sieges. From the outset Thomas was clear that it was only by bringing the Afghans along that the British would be able to disengage. It was, in the end, an Afghan not British insurgency.

The plan unravelled for five reasons. First, Thomas was let down by the civilian agencies. In the polite euphemism used at the time, there was a 'developmental pause' in the British reconstruction effort in Helmand. Second, he was let down by the governors. Daoud was sacked and his replacement Asadullah Wafa proved corrupt and anti-British. Third, he was let down by the Afghan National Army (ANA). The single kandak (battalion) in 3/205 Brigade went AWOL en masse, leaving the marines as the only official military force in Helmand. A second untrained kandak was despatched from Kandahar, and it was to the commando's credit that by the end of the tour this new lot were taking part in combined operations. Fourth, he was let down by the intelligence, or its near absence. 3 Commando Brigade had set about with the intention of conducting precise, targeted, intelligence-led operations. It came as a shock to discover that intelligence was so thin the commandos had to collect information in the crudest of ways – by 'advancing into ambush', as the marines joked. This lack of intelligence was exacerbated by the departure of the Americans, on whose resources every ISAF contingent relied. Lastly, he was let down by the highly unrealistic and under-resourced British campaign plan. Thomas simply did not have sufficient troops to fulfil the ambitions of the Helmand Plan, even if the panorama had remained relatively benign. After deploying his marines to the British 'footprints', inherited from the paratroopers, he was left with just one company (an ad hoc India Company) to pursue the main mission in the ADZ. Thomas welcomed the Musa Qaleh deal and hoped the same would happen in Now Zad. He reluctantly accepted the political impossibility of withdrawing from Sangin, and understood the importance of securing Kajaki Dam. These tasks, along with holding the southern outpost at Garmsir, swallowed virtually his entire force.

As well as abandoning the 'manouevrist approach', the British also largely abandoned

their counter-insurgency doctrine although Thomas (and later Mackay) would attempt to follow its dictates. British experience of 'small wars' over two centuries was second to none so it was unsurprising that this experience produced a significant body of official and unofficial literature on fighting insurgencies and rebellions. The 1909 *Field Service Regulations* and 1934 *Notes on Imperial Policing* were two early doctrinal works, influenced in part by Colonel Charles Callwell's popular *Small Wars*, and Major General Sir Charles Gwynn's *Imperial Policing*. The near-constant insurrectionary state of Ireland and the 1919 Amritsar massacre were two sores that coloured these works. In the post-war period, when communist revolutionary warfare seemed to pose the biggest threat to Western powers, the army updated its doctrine in *Keeping the Peace* (1959), and in the 1969 and 1977 editions of *Counter-Revolutionary Operations*. Works like *Low Intensity Operations*, written by the retired General Frank Kitson, were seminal in guiding British military thought during this period, as was Sir Robert Thompson's *Defeating Communist Insurgency* (1966) – although, as we have seen in the previous chapter, British Army officers were not especially diligent students of their own counter-insurgency doctrine. The experience of Northern Ireland forced a re-evaluation of this doctrine and resulted in the 1995 *Counter-Insurgency Operations*, the last major doctrinal work before the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.[356]

What emerged from this long history of small wars were three important principles: political primacy, minimum force, and unity of effort. On all three counts, in Helmand, the British failed to follow their own doctrine. This collective amnesia recalled Wellington's observation that nobody in the British Army read doctrine, except as an amusing novel.

The first principle - political primacy - was based on the key insight that although soldiers can restore order, they cannot restore peace. Politicians must do this. The second principle – minimum force - had its genesis in the disastrous experience of Amritsar when British soldiers massacred 379 protestors. The problem for the British in Helmand was that 'minimum force requires maximum numbers', a prerequisite that a down-sized army could no longer meet.[357] At the peak of the Northern Ireland campaign, 28,000 soldiers were deployed to Ulster, or almost three times as many as the British were ever able to deploy in Helmand. It may be added, to offer some balance, that British interpretation of minimum force could be flexible. Faced with increasing anarchy in Ulster in 1971, General Ian Freeland issued a directive that petrol-bombers would be shot on sight, hardly an example of restraint.[358] Many more examples could be plucked from imperial history where individuals have acted in heavy-handed ways, from Montgomery's brutal

suppression of the Palestinians in the interwar years, to Kitson's thumping of the Mau Mau. At any rate, in Iraq, the government was withdrawing soldiers as fast as it could, and in Afghanistan it never deployed sufficient soldiers in the first instance. The last principle – unity of effort - called for all the levers of government to work together. This so-called 'comprehensive approach', in modern parlance, was unfortunately proving a sham in Helmand.

Faced with wars spinning out-of-control the British seemed to suffer doctrinal exsufflication. Losing confidence in their own ideas and experience they instead fell back on copying what was undeniably the most significant piece of doctrine drafted in a generation, *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency* (2004), authored by General David Petraeus and an able cast of bright staff officers. This military doctrine manual entered the *New York Times* bestseller list, a unique achievement. *FM 3-24* became the precursor to a British version, *Army Field Manual Volume 1 Part 10 – Counterinsurgency Operations* (2009). Many sections of the American manual borrowed from previous British doctrine and personalities like the former SAS commander, Major General Graeme Lamb reportedly influenced Petraeus but this was small compensation for the loss of independent, critical thought. To all intents and purposes, the British *AFM Vol 1 Part 10* was the American *FM 3-24* in a different cover. This was not necessarily bad but it was a measure of just how intellectually dependent the British had become of their American ally. Perhaps the most important sentence in the new British doctrinal pamphlet was the first: 'Counterinsurgency is warfare'. This had come as a shock to a political and military class grown comfortable on peace support missions and the predictability of operations in Northern Ireland. To a politician or soldier who lived through the withdrawal from empire such a statement would have sounded like a banality. What did anyone imagine it was?

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Northern Ireland would cast a long shadow over British Army tactics in its subsequent campaigns in the Middle East and Central Asia. In 1972, at the height of 'the Troubles', the army was dealing with over 2,500 shooting incidents *a month*, many more than would be experienced in Helmand, and it suffered 102 fatalities.[359] By the end of the campaign, 697 British servicemen had been killed, again, a heavier loss than the combined Iraq-Afghanistan Wars.[360] What began as a civil rights movement descended into rioting and civil disobedience (a law and order problem), and then into outright violence (a terrorist problem). The resultant campaign – Operation Banner - left a profound mark on the way in which the British Army subsequently conducted counter-insurgency operations.

The basic template in Northern Ireland involved establishing a security force base, with satellite bases, in each of the six provinces, and rotating troops through these outposts. The two principal towns, Belfast and Londonderry, were special cases but these also followed the template. Once the campaign settled down following Operation Motorman (1972) – a 23,000 strong surge to clear the main terrorist strongholds in Londonderry and Belfast – very few actual terrorists were caught by army sections (or 'bricks' as they were known) on patrols, or through the routine stop and search of cars. Hundreds of thousands of boot miles were trodden by a generation of soldiers and the main rationale for all this foot-wearying activity was 'domination of the ground'. In the desolate, boggy and undeniably beautiful moors of rural Ulster, the British Army soldier became a part of the landscape, and much like the cows, harmless. Over thirty-seven years, the British Army 'only' killed 301 people, over half of whom were actually innocent civilians. The overwhelming majority were killed in the first few years of the unrest, in Belfast or Londonderry.[361] It was a poor record. By the mid-1980s, roughly 12,000 annually rotating British soldiers had succeeded in killing just two Republican terrorists (in the same period, a small number of undercover soldiers killed eighteen terrorists).[362] The terrorists' record was equally bad. The majority of terrorists died at their own hands in 'own goal' incidents making faulty bombs – indeed the 'Provos' (Provisional IRA) managed to kill 30 per cent more of their own members than the British Army managed to kill.[363] In the second half of the campaign, the number of successful PIRA bombs was few, but when they scored, the results could be devastating. After 1979, just twelve bombs killed half of all British service fatalities in the remaining years of the conflict.[364] The 'ground' – by which was meant Irish nationalist terrorism - was not dominated by the matrix of forts erected by the British government, nor by the quarter of a million soldiers that eventually rotated through the province.

The terrorists were militarily undone by an undercover intelligence war, by scores of informers, and by the actions of handfuls of covert soldiers and policemen. This was a dirty war, but no undercover war escapes taint. The main army protagonist was a unit whose existence was successfully kept secret for the duration of the conflict, and later disbanded - 14 Intelligence Company. The name was a cover for an ad hoc outfit that recruited from any branch of the armed forces, the main requirements for service being maturity and a dedication to a monk-like and dangerous existence. It was the patient surveillance work of 14 Intelligence Company that was instrumental in thwarting attacks through close surveillance, and collecting the evidential intelligence to prosecute

terrorists. Despite this effort, barely 10 per cent of terrorists known to have committed murders would be successfully convicted in the courts (and still fewer soldiers would be convicted for killing civilians).[365] Under Defence Secretary Roy Mason, 22 SAS would also play a significant if sometimes controversial role in operations that seemed to border on illegality, amplified by the arrival of Major General Tim Creasey, a former SAS commander. There were other players: the Force Research Units (FRUs) that ran informers, MI5, MI6, and the various specialist agencies of the Royal Ulster Constabulary that also contributed to this web of intelligence collection. It took years to coordinate these various players effectively, record-keeping was awful, and opportunities were lost. In many ways, the incompetence of the terrorists was matched by the incompetence of the security forces chasing the gunmen down.

The conventional forces were not entirely secondary to this covert war. It would be a disservice not to recognize the common soldier who held the line as communities in the province threatened to implode. Between 1969 and 1994, the British Army dealt with 12,664 bombs.[366] A staggering 224 tonnes of high explosives were found and neutralized. Over the same period, the security forces faced 35,338 shootings and confiscated 11,990 weapons. It is too easy to forget that for a period it was mayhem but for the bulwark provided by the British Army. Thousands of homes were damaged or destroyed and areas like the Short Strand in Belfast, or the Bogside in Londonderry, resembled war zones, not boroughs in modern Britain. The real attrition was not measured in gunmen killed, but in troublemakers arrested. In this respect, ‘the lads’, as they were romantically known in Republican circles, were simply worn down by the relentless raids and detention operations. By 1994, 15,939 mostly young men (Loyalists and Republicans) were arrested and variously charged with terrorist offences. It was taking these mischief-makers off the streets that proved decisive in restoring order. Over the same period, 370 terrorists died by their own hands, in tribal fighting, or at the hands of the security forces. These statistics conclusively show that for all the mistakes, the British Army largely conducted its campaign with restraint, or minimum force, and not as a neo-Cromwellian avenging force of English ‘colonialists’ as Nationalists alleged.

Strategically, the IRA was finally undone by a world that changed after September 11, 2001 (the first ceasefire was declared in 1994 following the Downing Street Declaration but was periodically broken in the intervening years). The single biggest financial contributor to nationalist Irish terrorist organisations was the United States, a situation which British governments had been forced to tolerate (Libya had been the biggest arms

supplier, an unlikely ally of the United States in the cause of Irish nationalism). A leaked British Army report drafted in 1978 (the Glover Report) revealed that the IRA was receiving as much as £120,000 annually through the US-based NORAID.[367] This was supreme hypocrisy on the part of an American establishment that would cry foul when America was attacked by terrorists and demand rigorous international controls to squeeze terrorist finances. Mohammed Atta could not have guessed that one of the consequences of his actions would be a collapse of support for Irish terrorism in the United States. The IRA could not continue to pursue a campaign of violence after the attacks on New York – only a political solution based on the 1998 Good Friday Agreements was now acceptable. Ironically, finally freeing the British Army from its long-standing role as 'piggy in the middle' in Northern Ireland served to make it possible to redeploy the same troops to deal with Muslim insurgencies provoked by the very chain of events sparked by the September 11 attacks.

If the thousands of foot soldiers were not really 'dominating the ground', then what purpose were they serving? Mostly, they were making a statement of political intent. The British Government (and Irish Government) would not bow to terrorism. The British Army would remain parked in Ulster, as long as it took to end the terrorism and restore political dialogue. If this was an endurance competition, and it often felt that it was, then the rule of law would outlast the rule of disorder. This evolution of counter-terrorism as grim endurance event was possible because Ulster was a sovereign part of the United Kingdom. A British government could park British soldiers, as long as it cared, on any part of its territory.

This was not an exportable model and the temptation to lapse back into 'Northern Ireland mode', not only in Afghanistan, but also in Iraq, was one of the flaws of the British counter-insurgency campaigns in these countries. This temptation was fanned by a half-informed, nationalistic media, as well as by some army officers, it appears, intent on flouting the difference between the sensitive, soft-hatted British squaddie and the shaven-headed, trigger-happy American GI. This hardly reflected the reality of the early years of 'the Troubles' in Ulster in which all sides were guilty of many sins and restraint was not in evidence. Both clichés in any case were wrong and the squaddie and GI both had to adapt to new rules of the game, each in their own way, and within their cultural constraints. Brigadier Thomas saw that Britain could not simply sit out an Afghan campaign indefinitely – and this was a very real danger. Echoing the Kennedy dictum on Vietnam, he believed this was a war the locals had to fight, not foreigners. Few would have argued

with him, but the reality, as he discovered, was that the Afghan security forces were not in a position to fight their war any time soon.

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Another arresting aspect of Operation Banner was the manner in which painfully won lessons were entirely forgotten. The British paid dearly from the lack of clear political direction and a credible, long-term plan to redress the justified grievances of the Catholic community. No overall direction was given until the hard-nosed Kitson foisted ‘the Kitson Strategy’ on the amorphous campaign. The army was mostly left to ‘get on with it’ and it did. Each brigade commander and even battalion commanders addressed the problems facing them as they saw fit, without over-arching direction, without continuity of effort, and with little thought over the future. Intelligence for several years was woeful and unshared. The value of surveillance technology, computers, and comprehensive personality databases was appreciated too slowly. Remarkably, co-ordination of army and police operations was not actually undertaken in a meaningful way until the late 1970s. Short rotations meant that every battalion only saw as far as its end of tour date and sought to prove its mettle with short term successes. Every battalion was different and left a confused stamp on the civilian population. All these mistakes would be replayed in Helmand as if the army had suffered from collective amnesia in the 1990s, or, perhaps more plausibly, as if the army’s brainpower had become somewhat anaesthetized by the fantasy of ‘the Revolution in Military Affairs’.

3 Para’s direct replacement in September 2006 was 42 Commando, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Matt Holmes. The Commando comprised of four sub-units: Juliet, Kilo, Lima and Mike Companies. Over the course of the tour, 42 Commando would swell to 1,500 personnel and comprise eleven companies, including Danish and Estonian contingents. Lima Company, which arrived first, was deployed to Sangin (Operation Platinum). It was subsequently rotated through Camp Bastion and Now Zad, and finished the tour where it began, taking part in an operation to ‘retake’ Sangin. One company from the Rifles took over the responsibility for holding Sangin in their absence (in fact C Company 2 Light Infantry, about to be amalgamated into the Rifles ‘super-regiment’). Kilo Company was temporarily sent to the American-Danish base FOB Price, on the outskirts of Gereshk, before being relieved by Juliet Company. Kilo Company then redeployed to Now Zad, relieving the pressed Royal Regiment of Fusiliers (Operation Silica). One troop was later sent to Kajaki. Juliet Company would remain at FOB Price for the remainder of the tour, a considerable luxury compared to the sub-units that were

rotated between bases. Mike Company – the last to deploy – was kept at Camp Bastion as an immediate reserve known as the 'Ops One Company'. For the first two months, this company barely deployed: a reflection of the general truce that appeared to take hold over most areas of Helmand. One troop from this reserve company was deployed to take over Athens and Normandy OPs at Kajaki. It would only remain on the mountain for a month before being relieved by a troop from Kilo Company which was itself relieved by Mike Company for the second half of the tour. Mike Company would subsequently relieve the Rifles company in Sangin, in late February (Operation Platinum Two).[368]

This detail matters because it is important to understand that although 3 Commando Brigade was numerically larger than the preceding deployment, which was essentially based around a single, reinforced battlegroup, the newcomers were not so numerically superior they could significantly change the pattern of dispositions laid down by their predecessors. Troop numbers were still far too low to cope with the geographical size of Helmand and the growing scale of the insurgency. The ratio of military per capita – a favoured and greatly debated ratio in counter-insurgency circles known as the 'Quinlivan formula' – was critically low.[369] In Kosovo there had been 20 soldiers per 1,000 inhabitants. In Bosnia the ratio had been 19 soldiers per 1,000 inhabitants. Even in Iraq, with a population of roughly 27 million, the occupying Western forces had managed to achieve a military per capita ratio of seven soldiers per 1,000 inhabitants. In Afghanistan the ratio was about 1 soldier per 1,000 inhabitants.[370] The Soviets had managed to generate a ratio of 27 soldiers per 1,000 inhabitants (including DRA Forces) and failed to subdue the mujahidin. Academic studies argued that Quinlivan's magic ratio (which was only based on a study of eight campaigns) only predicated the minimum number of soldiers required to avoid failure, and offered little reliable guidance on the force size required to ensure success. Regardless, ISAF was either demonstrating blind optimism or terrible complacency in its troop levels.

During the hand-over, Butler and Thomas had both agreed that the most important military task was to 'unfix the force' and to restore mobility to the battlefield. The reality was that without a significantly larger force the British footprint was always going to become fixed in a handful of locations, whatever Brigadier Thomas's intentions. An additional Rifles company was committed to holding Now Zad; Whiskey Company from 45 Commando became the force protection company for 28 Engineer Regiment; and India Company made up from 'odds and sods' in 45 Commando, became the protection company for Lashkar Gah. Only Zulu Company was truly available to undertake mobile operations, and it quickly got sucked into holding the town of Darvishan in the south.

In the end, the sum total gain from deploying all of 3 Commando Brigade, less 40 Commando, was to take over responsibility for one more besieged outpost: Darvishan in Garmsir. Politicians struggled to understand this hard arithmetic of military force. They saw and announced the headline figures of another thousand troops and appeared to believe (or wanted to believe) that this implied more results, and success. The army itself gave the impression that it did not fully appreciate what little extra capability the incremental force increases provided. A cartoon in the Spanish newspaper *El Pais* – a country which had deployed troops, with reservations, in neighbouring Badghis province – captured the heart of the dilemma. The cartoon showed a politician announcing: 'We will send more troops', with the punch line, 'to protect the troops we have already sent there.' For the early part of the war in Helmand, this was the vicious spiral in which the British were trapped.

Thomas hoped to withdraw from at least some of the northern platoon houses but this was dependent on Daoud striking some sort of political deal with the tribes. Daoud's capital had become exhausted and in December he was replaced by a seventy year old, non-English speaking governor called Asadullah Wafa who proved a disastrous replacement. The corrupt Wafa seemed to arrive with an antipathy for Westerners as a result of his experience as governor of Kunar Province where an American aerial attack had resulted in the deaths of a large number of civilians. He made little effort to cooperate with the British and on occasions he demonstrated outright hostility towards what he viewed as outside interference in Afghan affairs. Thomas's other vain hope was that reconstruction would take off. DfID disappointed again leaving the commandos with little to offer but empty promises.

There were some differences, however, between the 3 Para battlegroup and 3 Commando Brigade which would give the marines an extra edge. An important advantage was that the marines arrived with their own transport: thirty-three Viking crewed by the Marine Armoured Support Company. The Viking – or BV10 – was a Swedish vehicle designed for Arctic warfare. This was a tracked platform that comprised of a front cab and a box-like troop carrier towed at the rear. Each Viking could carry a section of marines and the front cab included a top cover sentry position so it could also be used as a fire support platform. The vehicles had been reinforced with additional armour as well as slat armour to defeat RPGs. Opinions on the Viking varied. It enjoyed outstanding mobility and was amphibious; indeed it was the only vehicle that could drive almost anywhere in Helmand. But it suffered from frustrating communications problems; the integration of the new Bowman radios and the electronic countermeasures (ECM) had provoked 'communications

fratricide' to the extent that the vehicle frequently had to be stopped and all systems switched off to allow it to communicate reliably.

There was also the question of protection. The marines at first were sceptical of the protection offered by the vehicle but were later surprised by its robustness to small arms and RPG fire. Its robustness to roadside bombs was another matter. Within a year it became apparent that the Viking was a death trap. The low flat bottom and the driver's position over the tracks meant that any IED strike inevitably resulted in the serious injury or death of the driver and commander. The marines would hand over the Vikings to the Royal Armoured Corps – troopers from the cavalry and Royal Tank Regiments. It was a testament to the courage of these men that they continued to crew this vehicle, knowing the statistical probabilities stacked against them, until a replacement vehicle could be procured (the Singaporean Bronco which arrived three years later). Their willingness to soldier on was reminiscent of the courage of wartime Sherman tank crews, as were the injuries suffered by some of the young troopers.

The first and most important decision Brigadier Thomas took was to end the ineffective command arrangements that had hobbled the paratroopers. The entire brigade headquarters was ordered to pack up and move to Lashkar Gah (Operation Fossil). It took about three weeks to shift everyone from Kandahar, with the paucity of available transport, but the disruption was worth the trouble. Until almost the end of the war, Lashkar Gah would remain the location of the British Task Force HQ, with Camp Bastion about twenty kilometres to the west acting as the logistic hub. Kandahar Air Base would remain the centre of air operations for Regional Command South-West, with a smaller army presence. The move to Lashkar Gah meant that the military staff would now be collocated with the civilians working in the PRT (Provincial Reconstruction Team), headed by David Slinn, an ex-ambassador with Kosovo experience. Slinn was part of the much larger 'Kosovo crowd' that had gravitated to the rich pickings of Afghanistan. Unfortunately, their intellectual baggage of templates and stabilisation concepts were not transferable from a European to central Asian country. This did not deter them from attempting to do exactly that anyway.

Who exactly was in charge – at least in Thomas's mind – remained an open question. Within the so-called Afghan Development Zone – essentially the areas surrounding Lashkar Gah and Gereshk – he felt the PRT should take the lead. Outside this zone, the military should take the lead.[371] In practice, the civilians were providing no leadership at all, and the military were predictably filling the vacuum. This ambiguity would bedevil the

British war in Helmand for years: there was no political primacy, still less unity of effort, two of the cardinal principles of counter-insurgency. Strictly, the senior civil servant in Afghanistan, the British Ambassador, was the government's senior representative and he therefore out-ranked all military officers. But he was based in Kabul, so his powers were delegated on a day to day basis to the PRT leader, Britain's senior civil servant in Helmand. However, practically no meaningful reconstruction was taking place; the Afghan Development Zone was a hollow phrase. This inaction could not last forever. In fact it only lasted about two months by which time the military resumed aggressive operations. The lack of urgency of the civilians was almost inevitably overtaken by the dynamism of the marines. This would be the story of 3 Commando Brigade. It would be a tour of two halves with the first half dominated by tenuous truces, and the second by a series of aggressive operations that started with a bang in January and would see the marines mounting operations right across north and south Helmand.

There was also another reason why the marines' tour presented this somewhat schizophrenic aspect. Thomas' espousal of 'courageous inactivity' was a complete anathema to the Americans. Much like Butler, he found himself under pressure to 'do something', with bullets preferably. This urge to action was compounded by ISAF, now led by the Dutch, who for reasons of national prestige also felt compelled to demonstrate resolve.[372] Squeezed between these two actors demanding action, and without support from a disengaged Whitehall, the marines duly obliged by doing what they do best – fighting.

Before these pressures mounted, Thomas turned his attention to the original mission, as laid out in the Helmand Plan. This was to support reconstruction and development in the Helmand ADZ. There was little happening in the way of reconstruction. However, in one town, Gereshk, existing infrastructure appeared to be under threat. Gereshk was Helmand's commercial hub and although it would never be seriously threatened by insurgents, the reported presence of lawless groups on the outskirts of the town could not be ignored. Of special concern was a hydro-electric dam on the Nahr-e Bughra canal just two kilometres north-east of the town which provided electricity for Gereshk. The corrupt ANP who guarded this dam were constantly being sniped at by Barakzai villagers and it was decided to establish a better protected, permanent presence by building two PVCPs (Permanent Vehicle Checkpoints) about 350 metres north of the canal on the main track leading into Gereshk. Ironically, this was exactly where the Russians had also built a security post, which the locals naturally remembered.

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Operation Slate 1, as it was called, was mounted on 5 November and involved Whiskey Company as well as engineers from 42 Squadron.[373] The group left FOB Price early in the morning in a package of sixteen Vikings and Pinzgauers and arrived at the dam as dawn was breaking. The ground around the dam was especially difficult. In addition to the main canal there were two further, smaller canals north and south of the Nahr-e Bughra, creating 100 metre wide racetracks that canalised all movement. Directly in front of the canal, at about a range of 400 metres was a large, rectangular orchard. South of the canal were numerous, smaller, irregular shaped orchards. The entire area was criss-crossed by scores of ditches, many of which were bounded by hedge lines, and there were compounds all within weapon range of the dam. It was perfect ground to mount ambushes and the only exposed ground was the area of the dam itself, where the marines dismounted.

It was not long before the first mortar bombs began landing. What followed was a pattern that would be repeated many times over the years wherever engineers set about building security force bases. The locals would attempt to disrupt the work by sniping and firing mortars or rockets and the British would retaliate with even more firepower.

This particular gun battle lasted twelve hours; as long as it took the sappers to complete the structures, despite the fire directed at them. By the end of the day one policeman had been killed and the marines reckoned they killed over twenty gunmen.[374] Apache and fighter aircraft had been used to suppress the enemy. The fighting however did not stop there with Mike and Juliet Companies both involved in helping Whiskey Company extract back to FOB Price. The entire operation took over 24 hours to complete; one Viking was destroyed and two marines were wounded. It may have amazed the marines who took part in this first operation to know that six years later the frontline would be exactly where they had left it.

Following the success of this mission, it was decided to mount Operation Slate 2. This involved Mike Company, used to protect the engineers as they built a PVCP immediately south of the town overlooking a bridge on Highway 1 known as Tom (the other two bridges in the area were predictably known as Dick and Harry). As in the first operation, the marines came under mortar fire which on this occasion was so accurate it was attributed to a Pakistani trainer.[375]

For the next two months Gereshk remained relatively quiet. Juliet Company mounted a cordon and search mission east of Gereshk (Operation Castella) but this yielded little. As

long as the marines did not provoke the locals, then it seemed the latter mostly ignored the marines. The dead chill of the Afghan winter may also have contributed to this lull in fighting. The truce ended on 10 January, and it was ended by the marines, not the insurgents. Intelligence suggested that a Taliban gang was camped in a compound in the village of Habibollah Kalay, in the middle of Barakzai tribal lands. This village was almost six kilometres north-east of Gereshk on the main gravel track north of the Helmand River. It sat on the edge of the Green Zone on the bend of a canal and was overlooked by a prominent hill. Habibollah Kalay only comprised of about one hundred family compounds but its position made it important and eventually a patrol base (PB Clifton) would be established on its edge manned by Danish troops. Not only did it sit astride one of the main routes to Gereshk but it was also situated about a half hour walk away from the sluice gate that fed the town's hydro-electric dam. In fact, unknown to the marines, the underlying reason for hostility in Habibollah Kalay lay in internecine tribal fighting and this settlement would never be pacified. 'The Taliban' were mislabelled local fighters, as in so many other instances in the war.

Juliet Company's plan for searching the suspected enemy compound was direct and uncomplicated. The company would leave FOB Price early in the morning, drive through Habibollah Kalay, turn south towards the sluice gate, and once in place, surround the compound. In the event, this simple plan unravelled and Juliet Company was stopped short of its target. Shortly after clearing the outskirts of the town the company ran into a massive ambush in the village of Samedkhan Kalay which also straddled the gravel track north of Gereshk. It seems the company had not considered that locals would quickly notice any movement of foreign troops, or that their speed of reaction to any incursion by the marines might be quick. What followed was a four hour gun battle in which the marines used artillery, mortars, Javelin missiles, Apache, Harriers and eventually an American B-1B bomber armed with a 2,000 pound bomb to subdue the villagers. Thousands of rounds were fired off by both sides. Eventually the marines did reach the suspect compound and it transpired that the intelligence was accurate – some bomb making materials and weapons were recovered. No marines were killed or injured in the operation but the sheer weight of ordnance concentrated on the local tribesmen claimed lives amongst their ranks. These early aggressive actions against the Barakzai north of Gereshk were never forgotten or forgiven and the ring of villages would remain implacable enemies of the British to the very end.

For the marines in Lima Company based at Sangin, the daily routine involved making improvements to the base, rather than gun battles with the locals. The truce negotiated at

the end of 3 Para's tour held for two months, by which time the marines handed over to C Company, 2 LI. This company would be confined to FOB Jackson and not be allowed to patrol in an effort to defuse tensions. This time was used to try to build relations with the town elders but with little to offer, British promises sounded hollow (there was no FCO or DfID representative in Sangin and the marines were not allocated funds to pursue reconstruction projects themselves). It was another wasted opportunity and a failure of the civil half of the British mission in Helmand. Lima Company then took over as the Ops One Company in Bastion, and later deployed to Now Zad (Operation Silica). Over the next three months, the light infantrymen continued to improve the defences of the Sangin district centre and suffered just two ineffectual attacks (the elders assured the soldiers that the attacks had not been perpetrated by 'the Taliban' but by some disgruntled locals). The same locals also attempted to encourage the British to leave by cutting off their water supply, without result. In the same way that the marines were unable to make any progress, so the soldiers found themselves essentially holding a fort in the middle of a hostile population and with nothing to offer to that population. All of this could have been avoided or at least defused. Trouble had brewed in Sangin for many months even without the British presence. Addressing the basic grievances of the townspeople (and the grievances in Now Zad and Musa Qaleh) was never attempted.

The departure of Lima Company from Sangin did not mean the marines had entirely vacated this volatile part of northern Helmand. In December, Whiskey Company from 45 Commando was deployed to FOB Robinson, five kilometres south of the town, alongside a troop of Light Guns from 29 Commando Regiment. It was actually Thomas' hope that all British troops might then be pulled out of Sangin and be based at Robinson where their presence would not provoke so much hostility. Had this plan been followed through, it may be observed, Task Force Helmand would have saved itself over 100 fatalities and countless amputees. Another sensible proposal was thwarted by unhelpful political interference, and American hostility to perceived British withdrawals. Ironically, this attitude would rebound spectacularly when US marines eventually assumed responsibility for Sangin, suffering terrible losses themselves.

The marines would remain at this base with the task of carrying out intelligence-gathering patrols in the Green Zone, establishing a pattern that would mark future British operations. The justification for these patrols - that they provided an opportunity to gather low-level intelligence and to gauge 'the atmospherics' – in practise, meant finding out how hostile the mainly Ishaqzai villagers were feeling on any particular morning. Whiskey Company encountered this hostility on its very first patrol mounted in the New Year

(Operation Magma). The ‘atmospherics’ were as ghastly as the phrase itself. The company was surrounded by gunmen, the Bowman radios failed making control exceedingly difficult, and 160 artillery shells (as well as support fire from Apache and F-18s) was required to extract the marines safely. By the end of the afternoon the atmosphere smelt of cordite, rather than the illusory perfume of ‘hearts and minds’.

While Whiskey Company was discovering the reality of the ‘atmospherics’ in the Upper Gereshk Valley, Mike Company finally withdrew from Kajaki, having been relieved by Kilo Company, and in turn prepared to relieve the light infantrymen holed up in Sangin district centre since November. The relief was only intended to be short term to make up a gap before the imminent deployment of a company from the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers to Sangin (Operation Platinum 3). The marines of Mike Company could not have guessed how unlucky this decision would be. The hand-over took place in late February and almost as soon as the last grateful soldier left the base on the last Chinook, another round of fighting erupted in Sangin. The sudden flare-up was almost certainly connected to the US-led Operation Achilles. Like Mountain Thrust and Medusa (the two major operations in the preceding tour), Achilles was another example of quite futile and ultimately self-defeating attempts to clear entire districts of ‘Taliban’. The only and predictable outcome of these operations was to stir anger amongst the tribes and boost insurgent recruiting. The British part of Achilles would be the ‘recapture’ of Sangin, a town that did not need recapturing, just good governance. It seems that Thomas was entirely against the notion of attacking Sangin but was over-ruled by ISAF politics. Knowledge that the operation was about to take place was widespread. It appears probable that the townspeople associated the arrival of the marines with the start of the operation and it was this that provoked the fighting. Recapturing Sangin, in this sense, became a necessary self-fulfilling prophecy.

The intensity of the attacks, which lasted about two weeks, a usual period before ammunition stocks depleted, surprised the marines of Mike Company. There were literally hundreds of gun battles in early March as well as unpredictable mortar and rocket attacks. The majority of the attacks came from the area of higher ground north-east of the district centre, ‘Wombat Wood’, and from the area of dense orchards and compounds immediately south of the base. As well as the usual 81mm mortars and 107mm rockets, the insurgents also succeeded in operating an old Russian AGS-17 against the district centre – a weapon that launched 30mm grenades with better accuracy than the usually highly inaccurate mortars and rockets. The fact that the locals’ marksmanship was abysmal offered little relief – the tribesmen had completely failed to kill a single British soldier in Sangin since

the preceding September – the arithmetic of chance was such that eventually they would get lucky.

The luck turned against the marines on the fourth day of the attacks when a mortar bomb landed on the three storey Fire Support Group tower lacerating one of the marines with shrapnel. This was the tallest building in the base and it was inevitably used as an aiming mark. The marines could not abandon the sangars built on the roof of the building because this would allow the insurgents to draw even closer to the base. Their only option was to hunker down and hope. Manning the tower required great reserves of nerve and never more so than in the first week of March when the townspeople made a concerted effort to oust the company from the base. A few days after the successful mortar hit on the tower roof, an RPG struck one of the sangars instantly killing a lance bombardier and mortally wounding a second. The casualties continued to mount after a grenade attack claimed two more marines, both seriously wounded. Then a double strike with grenades and RPGs claimed the life of a sergeant major, Mick Smith, who had been sent as a relief for the two killed lance bombardiers, and seriously wounded another marine. The popular sergeant major who had made a strong impression on the marines with his courage under fire was hit in the face by a grenade and stood no chance. Mike Company had now suffered seven casualties in as many days and the intensity of the attacks did not seem to diminish.

The gunmen, however, were not having it all their own way. As well as facing aerial attacks, the troop of 105mm Light Guns based at FOB Robinson, just six kilometres away, had also wreaked considerable destruction on the areas of the town adjoining the base which the gunmen were using for cover. The main bazaar was entirely abandoned and derelict. The ‘Pipe Range’ – the main track leading to the base – had suffered extensive damage. And the locals – inevitably under such a weight of counter-fire – had begun to suffer significant casualties. Throughout the offensive the marines were able to monitor enemy chat using their ICOM scanners. It was evident from the intercepts that the townspeople had had enough. Like the paratroopers before them, the marines had held the district against sustained attack and demonstrated that the British could not be dislodged. This would be the last such deliberate and sustained attack against a major British base. For the rest of the war the insurgents would switch tactics, avoid head-on confrontations, and opt instead to fix the British with sniping and IEDs. At the end of the first week of March, as if it had only been a passing storm, the attacks ended and Mike Company handed over to C Company of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers. The fusiliers would suffer no fatalities or significant attacks during their tenure at the base confirming that the gunmen had been

exhausted attempting to dislodge Mike Company from Sangin District Centre.

The two week assault on the district centre had, nonetheless, rattled the brigade staff. With Operation Silver imminent (the British part of Achilles), Brigadier Thomas might have been forgiven for believing that this deeply hostile town could realistically be cleared of troublemakers; the idea was as far-fetched as clearing Londonderry or West Belfast of Irish nationalists. Sangin was a town in revolt. Everybody knew somebody involved in the insurgency. If the locals were not actively attacking the British, they at least sympathised with the gunmen. All that would be achieved in an outright assault on the town would be more destruction. The gunmen would be driven underground for a brief period but the resistance would re-seed and grow back like a weed.

The size of the town alone was a problem. Sangin sprawled over sixteen square kilometres – an area that required at least a brigade-sized force, which Brigadier Thomas did not have. Operation Silver would have to concentrate on the town centre and ignore the outlying areas. It was only possible to mount the operation thanks to the arrival of Task Force Fury 1, a reinforced battalion of American paratroopers from 82nd Airborne Division. An advantage the commandos did enjoy, however, was the Helmand River. If the marines squeezed from the north and south of the town they could be sure that no, or very few, insurgents would escape west. Any escaping fighters would have to flee east into the maze of compounds that made up the town's suburbs.

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Operation Silver was the largest and final operation undertaken by 3 Commando Brigade. The scheme for the operation was complex in that it involved companies clearing into the town, turning about once they had reached the district centre, and then clearing back out of the town. All of 42 Commando, less Kilo Company that was flown into the district centre under the cover of an artillery bombardment, would initially deploy to the north-east of the Sangin, cutting Route 611 and acting as a deception to the main assault that would come from the south. This force was supported by C Squadron of the Light Dragoons, an Estonian mechanised company, and a Dutch armoured reconnaissance squadron. The main assaulting force was provided by Task Force Fury 1, pushing into Sangin from the south, using Route 611 as the axis of advance. C Company of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers would act as the anchor and hold the district centre throughout these manoeuvres. The fire support was intensive. Artillery sub-units included: 28/143 Battery (Tombs' Troop), 127 (Dragon) Battery, an American Light Gun battery, a battery of Canadian 155mm guns, and the commando's mortars.

The marines left Gereshk on 2 April and deployed to the east of Sangin ready for the feint. At the same time the Estonian and Dutch companies established a screen around the town to catch ‘squirters’ (fighters attempting to break out of the ring of coalition forces). On the night of 4 April Juliet Company mounted its feint supported by what was described as a ‘robust fire plan’. That same day, 4 April, Task Force Fury 1 dropped by helicopter on a rocky plateau three kilometres south of the town. After the paratroopers shook out they began the laborious and dangerous task of clearing the settlements of Chinah and Ahmad Za’i to the south of the town. This was an area of undulating rocky ground with hundreds of compounds, some occupied and some derelict, joined by a maze of walls.

Progress was slow. Wherever the paratroopers met determined resistance they replied with overwhelming firepower. Even with the massive aerial support at their disposal, trying to identify and kill fleeting gunmen in this warren of buildings proved frustratingly difficult. As the two forces north and south of the town began converging towards the centre, Thomas flew into the district centre with his Tactical HQ to take command of the operation. Meanwhile, in the north, 42 Commando was also experiencing difficulties. Using a tactic that would become standard, locals had sown IEDs on all the likely approach routes. Unused to this ruse, the marines unguardedly stumbled on the roadside bombs suffering nine casualties and damaging four vehicles. By the end of the first day Sangin had been surrounded from the north and south but armed tribesmen were still firmly in control of the town.

Determined to maintain the momentum of the assault, Thomas ordered 42 Commando to take the bold but risky step of driving straight down Route 611 into the town centre, calculating correctly that the insurgents would be distracted by the American assault to the south. It was risky because the experience of the previous day suggested the route would be sown with IEDs. To the marines’ relief the move paid off although a further four vehicles struck roadside bombs, on this occasion failing to cause serious casualties. To further distract the enemy, a fire plan was implemented as deception. The 42 Commando Battery Commander, a Major Lucas, recalled that the bombardment fooled the Taliban into thinking it was just cover for another resupply, and furthermore, succeeded in killing twelve insurgents.[376]

Lima Company led the way, followed by Juliet Company. They were supported by a second impressive fire plan as well as top cover from prowling Apaches. Once re-organised in the area of the district centre, Juliet Company was ordered to clear the area of slightly elevated and wooded ground to the north-east of the district centre, and Lima

Company cleared the area of orchards and compounds to the south of the base. Kilo Company was held in reserve and subsequently pushed past Juliet Company into the Green Zone north of Sangin.

While the marines undertook these clearances, the paratroopers of Task Force Fury 1 also pushed north along Route 611, effectively squeezing the insurgents out of the town centre. The entire operation took a further two days and by the time it was called off Sangin was a deserted and badly damaged town, especially around the central bazaar where the strongest resistance had been encountered. Operation Silver was judged to have succeeded but its success recalled the Vietnam saying that 'we had to destroy the village in order to save it'. Sangin had now joined Now Zad, Musa Qaleh and Darvishan as a trashed and half-deserted town. In the eyes of the marines, success was simply measured by the number of times they were attacked on a daily basis. Before Operation Silver the district centre had been attacked 4-5 times daily. Following the conclusion of the operation a more tolerable average of two daily attacks was recorded.

In the far north, a quite different tale unfolded. The story of the marines' occupation of Kajaki became a paradigm of the stalemate that followed. All the British casualties at Kajaki were self-inflicted either from straying into minefields, as the paratroopers had done, or from accidents (including a fratricide incident that resulted in three deaths); or from aggressive and ultimately fruitless actions undertaken by the British to clear the Alizai villages north of the dam. Once these actions were over, the de facto frontline simply re-established itself, more or less where it previously ran. The raw fact was that the British never had the numbers to do more than hold the dam itself and the villagers in the surrounding area were so hostile – probably from their experiences with the Soviet Army – that reconciliation was impossible. Militarily, the best the British could hope to achieve was to arrange the frontline so that it suited them and not the hostile tribes. This was achieved by 3 Commando Brigade and was an important legacy the marines bequeathed to successor brigades.

In October, when the marines first took over responsibility for the dam, they were only able to deploy one troop for its defence. This troop occupied the two observation posts (OPs) on the eastern side of the mountain overlooking the dam – Athens and Normandy – as well as the forward operating base next to the dam. The obvious first task was to occupy the western half of the mountain, not an easy task on a bald rocky feature with the ever-present threat of Russian mines (indeed this was the only vital task as once the entire mountain was in British hands, the tribesmen could not hope to seriously threaten the dam

as all approaches were visible from the mountain). However, the marines were so stretched they would be unable to undertake this task until the beginning of January when an entire company – Mike Company – was deployed to Kajaki to permanently occupy the western positions.

Before undertaking any offensive actions the company set about implementing a patrolling program to gather intelligence on the insurgent dispositions and patterns of behaviour. This was probably the most successful patrolling undertaken by the marines in Helmand over the winter and was reminiscent of the nightly patrols undertaken on the front lines in Korea over similar mountainous terrain. In many respects this was almost a conventional military stand-off. There were virtually no civilians left in the area. There were no 'hearts and minds' to be won. Instead, a straightforward contest between two military forces developed (albeit one very irregular force), over a handful of important features and there was only ever going to be one winner. No marines were killed undertaking this patrolling and none were killed by the routine attacks against the dam during those first three months of the marines' tour. It was a game, but the fact that the local fighters were decidedly useless at it did not mean the British would tolerate the situation indefinitely.

By the beginning of the year Mike Company was able to undertake its first mission – Operation Clay – to push back the frontline.[377] This operation involved four separate tasks. First, the western half of the mountain overlooking the south of the dam was occupied. This gave the marines two more permanent observation points (OPs Sparrow Hawk West and Sparrow Hawk East which the paratroopers had previously occupied). These were also former Russian positions and the names were well chosen because they effectively provided observation right across the entire western half of Kajaki. They also overlooked the hostile village of Kajaki Olya on the bend of the river. With their viewing devices the marines could scan far to the north up a wadi which the villagers used to drive to the frontline. The occupation of the entire mountain south of the dam effectively ended the contest. The marines could now sweep the entire area around the deserted Tangye village – which was the only approach to the dam – with accurate fire.

The second task was to clear out an insurgent position on a prominent hill just north of the bend on the river at a location marked Spiray Nikeh on the maps. The marines knew this as 'caves and shrines hill' ('nikeh' means 'shrine' and there was a shrine marked on the maps at the top of the hill). The insurgents occupied this hill for the same reason that the British occupied the mountain south of the dam. It gave them perfect views across

Tangye village and it allowed them to take pot shots at the British patrols from the cover of some caves that had been dug out in the past. The plan for clearing ‘caves and shrine hill’ involved following a pylon line to the southern end of the hill and then sweeping from south to north over the hill which was about 400 metres long. Although the marines mounted the operation in darkness they were spotted and became engaged on their left flank by gunmen in the village of Shemali Ghulbah, only 300 metres from the base of the hill.

As dawn broke a gun battle ensued with more tribesmen joining in from the villages of Chinah and Khalawak just north of the hill. By mid-morning, with the help of a pair of Apache, ‘cave and shrine hill’ was cleared and the marines came across a rare sight – the bodies of dead fighters. At this point it was decided to continue the battle and clear out the nearby village of Khalawak. A second gun battle ensued which lasted for most of the rest of the day without a decision either way. The marines only suffered one injury and the fighters had been temporarily evicted from one of their frontline villages.

The third task was to build an ANP checkpoint on the bend of the Route 611 west of the dam. This would provide the demotivated ANP with better protection and hopefully demonstrate who owned Route 611. While the checkpoint was being built the marines undertook the fourth and last task which was to raid a compound in the village of Kajaki Olya which was believed to be some sort of training camp. Once again a running gun battle ensued with villagers and nothing was found in the compound. For the marines, the last four days had been an opportunity to take the fight to the gunmen. For the villagers the attacks were a provocation and an infringement of the rules of the game that had held for the last three months.

The success of Operation Clay was quickly followed by a raid on a known insurgent mortar position north of the dam known to the marines as ‘Nipple Hill’.[378] This was a prominent hill south-east of a small village called Khak-e Jahannam. This entire area had once been occupied by Soviet forces and the evidence of past battles was everywhere in the numerous ruins and trench positions. The Russians themselves almost certainly used this hill as an observation point as it commanded good views west into the hostile villages bordering the dam. Approaching the hill was straightforward as there were numerous tracks that led from the deserted Tangye bazaar along a shallow valley to the base of the hill. As the marines approached the hill, however, they came under fire while still in the open. In the ensuing battle Marine Thomas Curry, a twenty-one year old from East London who had won the Commando Medal in basic training, was shot dead. A second

marine – Matthew Bispham – earned a Military Cross charging across open ground with bayonet fixed and killing two fighters. The mortar position was destroyed and the marines returned with a rare catch: a wounded gunman who subsequently died of his wounds. The raid seemed to have an effect; for a short period afterwards there was a lull in the mortar fire.

The momentum of raids against insurgent positions north of the dam continued unabated. At the end of January, after a number of ambushes and counter-ambushes, Mike Company undertook Operation Volcano to clear the village of Barikju, about three kilometres north-west of the dam. The village was no more than a cluster of about twenty compounds in a shallow re-entrant, on the east side of the prominent wadi that ran south to the Helmand River. There was a mosque in the middle of the village and the pylon line from the dam ran directly over the village which was one reason why it was inhabited; the locals routinely and illegally tapped into the local grid for electricity. Barikju was one of four such villages all within throwing distance of each other, on either side of the wadi. South of Barikju was the now much war-damaged Khalawak, and across the wadi were the villages of Khvohelabad and Chinah. The marines decided to clear the village because it was evident that it was being used as a resting place by fighters before they walked the short distance south to take pot shots at the marines.

The operation itself was set up as an elaborate ambush. In the hours of darkness, the marines sneaked into Khalawak, just 300 metres south of Barikju and advanced on the village at daybreak to deliberately provoke a response. As soon as the first sentry opened fire the marines began mortaring the village. Later, a 1,000 pound bomb was dropped from a B-1B bomber on a suspected insurgent compound. An unequal fight followed as Mike Company had carefully sighted machine guns and snipers on the high ground overlooking the village. Apaches were placed on call to catch anyone trying to break cover over open ground. In the event, the single blow of the aerial bomb seemed to kill or stun the fighters and the marines encountered little resistance, eventually returning to FOB Zeebrugge having taken no casualties.

The last major operation undertaken at Kajaki by Mike Company – Operation Kryptonite - took place on February 12, after a delay caused by fog, and it involved both the resident company and Kilo Company sent north in preparation for a hand-over with Mike Company. The aim of the operation was to clear gunmen from the last two villages in the wadi north of the dam; Chinah and 700 metres to the west, Shemali Ghulbah. Both these villages could be overlooked from ‘caves and shrine hill’ and this is where

Lieutenant Colonel Matt Holmes, who commanded the operation, set up his tactical HQ. The villages were attacked in sequence with Mike Company clearing Shemali Ghulbah first, and Kilo Company subsequently clearing Chinah.

Resistance was sporadic. As the British were to discover that summer, a large show of force provoked flight rather than flight. Most of the compounds were empty although it took the marines an entire day to confirm that the general area was clear of enemy. After the marines withdrew the insurgents reacted predictably to this incursion into their territory by firing off fourteen rockets at FOB Zeebrugge, reinforcing a pattern of tit-for-tat violence that had become well established. As Mike and Kilo companies were recovering from Operation Kryptonite at FOB Zeebrugge, Juliet Company had made its way north from Gereshk to the village of Kajaki Sofla. The village sat on the edge of Green Zone astride Route 611 and was known to harbour insurgents. The aim of this separate operation – Operation Bauxite – was to disrupt insurgents south of the dam, but it mostly succeeded in just provoking a massive and inconclusive gun battle. As Juliet Company approached Kajaki Sofla from the east, spread across the width of a wadi that led into the village, they came under fire and were caught in the open. Then one of the Vikings struck a Russian mine and two marines were injured. The operation was aborted and became a casualty extraction task instead – but not before the marines had fired off over 18,000 small arms rounds and launched eleven Javelin missiles – a colossal expenditure for no reward.[379]

The relief of Mike Company by Kilo Company did not entail a respite in attacks against hostile villages ringing the dam. Mike Company had attempted to clear the five principal villages astride the wadi north of the dam: Khalawak, Barikju, Khvolehabad, Chinah and Shemali Ghulbah. All these settlements were within a two square kilometre box north-west of the dam and had largely become abandoned because of the fighting. Immediately to the west of this cluster of villages were two further villages, Machi Kheyl and Bagar Kheyl that were also suspected to harbour insurgents. The problem for the marines was that it was evident that civilians were also still present in the villages. The aim of Operation Knight, undertaken on the 6 March, was therefore ambiguous. The marines of Kilo Company would either fight to clear the villages, or if it became apparent that the insurgents had fled, they would attempt to engage with the locals. This double and contradictory mission would, in the event, prove too ambitious.

The plan for Operation Knight was simple but risky. The company tactical HQ would be set up on ‘caves and shrine hill’, an area from which both villages could be observed. A

fire support group would then establish a gun line south of the easternmost village, Machi Kheyl, while two troops would approach Bagar Kheyl from the south following a track that ran past a cemetery. The track would act as a boundary for the two troops. Overhead, Kilo Company would be protected by a pair of Apache and two USN F-15s. The Kilo Company commander – Major Sutherland - also had a Desert Hawk UAV feeding imagery to his tactical HQ. The risk in the operation lay in a 200 metre stretch of open and slightly rising ground which the marines would have to cross before reaching the village. H-Hour was set at daybreak and with none of the aircraft or UAV sensors detecting the presence of enemy, the marines were ordered forward to the first set of compounds at the southern edge of Bagar Kheyl.

They reached within sprinting distance of the village when the entire front seemed to erupt with gun fire. In fact, the company had long been spotted by sentries who demonstrated good fire discipline and waited until the last moment before opening fire on the advancing marines. Marine Benjamin Reddy was killed and a second wounded (hit by three rounds in the chest which were stopped by the body armour). The surviving marines went to ground and spent the next hour trying to extricate themselves from the fire swept fields south of the village. They finally managed to find dead ground and a pair of Apaches were used to attack the suspected insurgent firing points. This allowed the marines to resume the assault but they found the intricate maze of walls and compounds difficult to negotiate and potentially hazardous. Two more marines were shot attempting to enter a compound and it became clear that clearing Bagar Kheyl was going to prove a tough fight. Over the course of the day Kilo Company found numerous tunnels and rat runs that the gunmen were using to evade their pursuers and there were several lucky escapes with armed individuals suddenly appearing out of nowhere, in the midst of the assaulting marines. As a troop commander later recalled: ‘As the day progressed it became fully apparent how so many fighters had remained undetected during the initial advance, as an extensive tunnel system was found to run the entire length of the village. These subsequently fed into well-constructed and fortified firing positions.’ Many of these over-excited defenders paid with their lives. By midday both sides were calling for reinforcements – a platoon from the Rifles joined the fight from ‘caves and shrine hill’, and more villagers were detected moving south. By early afternoon it was decided to end the operation which was concluded with a significant aerial bombardment of suspected insurgent positions. Kilo Company claimed that it killed about forty gunmen – almost certainly a gross exaggeration - but it also suffered four casualties, including the single fatality.

The marines judged Operation Knight a success. Their superior training and tactics had demonstrably been the difference between the two sides. Insurgent activity in the area declined in the immediate aftermath of the operation. But this was the very point which the British never reconciled satisfactorily. The short interludes in the fighting that followed a British clearance operation had no long term significance. Like the reservoir of water the marines were protecting, the levels of fighting merely rose again with the next rainfall of weapons and recruits. Bagar Kheyl was never cleared of insurgents. It was destroyed, deserted by civilians, and eventually re-occupied by insurgents. The same was true of every other village in the area. Six years later, when US marines were based at Kajaki, the two sides were still fighting over exactly the same ring of villages that 42 Commando had ‘cleared’. The frontline had moved not a jot.

Fifty kilometres to the west, the other half of Kilo Company took over responsibility for the town of Now Zad. The situation here was frankly awful. The town was partially destroyed and abandoned. A Company of 1 Royal Regiment of Fusiliers had just endured the longest siege in living memory in appalling conditions. Determined to renew negotiations a truce was arranged with the town elders. This only lasted about three weeks but it did allow some clearance of the war damage in the bazaar. After that the marines found themselves in exactly the same position as the fusiliers. A frontline ran along a wadi about one kilometre east of the town. All the ground east of this wadi belonged to a hostile local population and all the ground west – effectively Now Zad town – was no man’s land. The British dominated the ground as far as their weapon ranges. There were frequent sniping and mortar attacks on the base and despite Kilo Company’s best intentions no substantial progress was made other than some token Cash for Works (CfW) projects clearing debris from the town centre.

For two months the marines resisted provocation but in the end the temptation to take the fight to the locals proved too strong. On 8 December, Kilo Company mounted a large fighting patrol on the edge of the frontline, to the north-east of the town. A day long gun battle ensued in which Corporal Hewett was awarded a Military Cross for leading his section out of a precarious situation. The patrol achieved nothing except whet the appetite of the marines for another confrontation. On 12 December they set out again and this time the patrol went badly awry with a Marine Richard Watson, a twenty-three year old from Caterham, receiving a serious gunshot wound from which he later died. The patrol was aborted and once again, nothing was achieved. For the locals, these patrols were intolerable infringements of the frontline. For the marines, the justification for these patrols was that they demonstrated British resolve to patrol where they wished. The truth

was that without greater numbers – and reportedly the Russians had deployed a battalion to this area – the marines could not hope to substantially change the status quo in Now Zad. Like the stalemate at Kajaki, aggressive British patrolling was simply a way of causing self-inflicted casualties. In January Kilo Company was relieved by Lima Company and the game went on, without resolution.

To fulfil Brigadier Thomas's vision of mobile warfare - or 'unfixing the force' - a new, composite unit had to be created. This task fell to Juliet Company based at FOB Price. The idea of creating desert 'flying columns' appears to have been mooted by Brigadier Butler – perhaps unsurprisingly given his SAS background – but without the troops to create such a force, the idea largely remained on the drawing board. Tootal actually did create a prototype MOG (which initially stood for Manoeuvre Outreach Group) using the Patrols Platoon, half a squadron from the Household Cavalry, and an Estonian platoon. This grouping was used with some success on several operations. The credit for getting the idea off the drawing board, however, must go to Brigadier Thomas and his marines. The re-founded MOG was re-labelled a Mobile Operations Group. The supposition that ordinary Helmandis were sitting in villages waiting for the friendly arm of an outreach group was wishful thinking. The latter title was the accurate description of what the MOG was and did.

A MOG comprised of a group of about forty vehicles which included artillery, mortars, an electronic warfare team, a mortar locating radar and a UAV detachment. Repair and recovery vehicles and a medical team were also included in the package. Heavy weapons were provided by the FSGs, or Fire Support Groups, mounted in Vikings and Land Rover WMIKs. In the words of its commander, Major Murchison, a MOG was essentially a long range desert patrol, which sought to seize the initiative from the insurgents.[380] After leaving Price, a MOG could stay out in the desert for two to three weeks before returning to base to re-supply. It was classic Second World War raiding.

In practice, 'mogging' as it became known, became an 'advance to contact'. The MOG would establish a desert leaguer then the manoeuvre group (WMIKs and Vikings) would probe the edge of the Green Zone to test the reaction of the locals. Invariably the reaction was hostile. Major Murchison recalled that on *every occasion* they attempted to enter the Green Zone, they were shot at.[381] Over the course of the winter Juliet Company would become involved in dozens of gun battles conducting MOG operations. The obvious conclusion to draw from this reception was that the British had provoked a rural insurrection in Helmand province. This conclusion, however, never seems to have been

drawn. Instead, a ‘Taliban’ narrative continued to inform official reporting, even though the everyday experience of the marines was one of universal tribal hostility to the British presence. This should not have surprised. After the violence of the summer, the appearance of British troops only meant one thing to Helmandis, and it was not ‘hearts and minds’ or the promise of aid and reconstruction.

The MOG would on occasions be augmented by the Brigade Reconnaissance Force (BRF) who considered themselves an elite force, as well as by C Squadron of the Light Dragoons. These Geordie cavalrymen were initially met with some scepticism by the marines until they realised their worth. Led by a Major Ben Warrack the Light Dragoons proved imaginative and enterprising. Like the marines, Warrack found that any intrusion into the Green Zone inevitably led to gun battles. A typical sequence of events would see women and children leaving the area and young men arriving on the scene, drawn like ‘moths to a light’. Within an hour the hedgerows would be echoing with the sound of gun fire. Appreciating that he was involved in a cat and mouse game against an elusive foe, Major Warrack used ruses and feints to draw out the gunmen, on one occasion staging a fake IED strike to provoke them into revealing their positions. The cavalrymen also rode their luck. On one occasion an insurgent fired an RPG at point blank range at a Scimitar. Somehow, the warhead passed between the commander and gunner’s heads. The shocked crew returned fire with the turret machine gun and also missed. On another occasion a Scimitar suffered an RPG strike that fortunately only caused relatively minor injuries to the crew who continued to fight on from their vehicle until rescued. The Light Dragoons would end their tour without suffering any fatalities, a testament to their luck, but also to their canniness. Despite the rundown state of their vehicles they managed to spend over 100 days on the move and reckoned that they covered 3,000 miles. Tens of thousands of rounds were expended in scores of gun battles.

3 Commando Brigade had inherited six ‘footprints’ from the paratroopers, all in the centre or north of Helmand: the Lashkar Gah PRT; FOBs Price and Robinson near Gereshk and Sangin respectively; Sangin District Centre; the police station at Now Zad; and Kajaki Dam. It was clear however that a sixth location would have to be invested. Fifty kilometres south of Lashkar Gah sat the town of Darvishan in Garmsir district. The town itself was little more than a one street bazaar located between the Helmand River and a prominent canal but its location made it all important to controlling the southern half of Helmand Province. A small OMLT (Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team) led by the Royal Irish had been deployed to Darvishan during 3 Para’s deployment, and they had found a suspicious town in an area threatened by insurgents. Before the arrival of the

Royal Irish, a Taliban gang had taken over the town and reportedly raised the Pakistani *Jamiat-e Ulema* flag, suggesting ISI involvement, before being kicked out.[382]

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Darvishan sat at the head of lozenge-shaped area of fertile land about fifteen kilometres long and ten kilometres wide. To the west of the town was a rocky desert plateau which ran into the Dasht-e Margo, 'the Desert of Death'. To the east of the town was the sandy Registan desert. A gravel track following the west bank of the Helmand River, Route 605, connected Darvishan to the capital Lashkar Gah. North of Darvishan a thin Green Zone belt followed the course of the river and its matrix of American-built canals, gradually widening near the provincial capital. South of Darvishan the cultivated belt narrowed again, closely hugging the dwindling river across a wild and desperately poor area. About seventy kilometres south of Darvishan the river kinked sharply to the west in an area the marines would nickname 'the fish hook' because of its shape. If you carried on driving south for another 120 kilometres across the barren desert you would reach the Chaghai hills and the Durand Line, the border with Pakistan, not recognised by Afghanistan. South of this border was Baluchistan, a troubled region.

A traveller transiting either south or north through this part of Helmand would naturally be drawn to Darvishan. It was the only substantial settlement in a hundred kilometre radius of otherwise uninhabited desert. This barrenness was recent, perhaps only a few centuries old. A string of old forts and scores of ruins testified to a fertile belt of land that had since turned dry. Hundreds of desert tracks now converged on the town from all points of the compass, most lasting no more than a season before being wiped away by sandstorms and the annual winter rainfall. When the British turned up at Darvishan it was mostly a smuggler's transit point, and a natural stop-over point for fighters travelling north from Pakistan. During the Soviet-Afghan War this route had gained in importance, eventually dragging Helmand into a war that had mostly been confined to Kandahar. The population was very mixed: around a third was Noorzai and a quarter was Alikozai. Andars represented a substantial minority. In addition to these three principal tribes there were at least another fifteen tribal groups including Ishakzai, Alizai, Achekzai, Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras. The small team of Royal Irish deployed to the town became holed up in a dilapidated agricultural college that was subsequently renamed FOB Delhi. About ten kilometres to the south-west of the town was a second base, FOB Dwyer, where a gun line was established.

Darvishan desperately needed reinforcements and these were initially based around the

BRF and a MOG made up from Zulu Company. The BRF's first task was to find out more about the area. British intelligence on southern Helmand could be written on one side of paper. The marines even lacked mapping which prevented them from extending their patrols much beyond Darvishan. Operations were also limited by the availability and range of helicopters. Given that the BRF was getting into gunfights whenever it approached the Green Zone (in the end it would be involved in seventy-two fights) nobody wanted to take the risk of suffering a serious casualty in this remote and inaccessible area.[383] These fighting patrols continued for about two months, supported by the Light Dragoons, before a decision was taken to push the insurgents away from the town and reinforce the small British force with a permanent company deployment. This would involve holding an artificial hillock known as JTAC Hill overlooking the 250 metre long bridge that spanned the river on the west side of the town (JTAC was named after the Joint Terminal Attack Controllers who used this high ground as a vantage point); as well as a checkpoint in the centre of the town, and an eastern checkpoint overlooking the canal at a bridge (later christened 'Balaklava Bridge'). At the bottom of the canal, under the bridge, was a rusting Russian armoured car, evidence of previous fighting in this area.

The plan to clear Darvishan was unimaginative, under-resourced and bound to end in failure.[384] On 5 December, Zulu Company broke camp in the desert and entered Darvishan in darkness. C Squadron of the Light Dragoons comprising sixteen Scimitars remained on the flank on the western side of the river, and a section of Vikings was despatched to the eastern flank alongside the canal. Overall command of the operation was vested in Colonel Robert Magowan, the commanding officer of the IX Group (Information Exploitation Group). As dawn broke, Zulu Company was ordered to advance in line, across a 1,000 metre frontage, much like soldiers on a World War One battlefield. In the latter war this would have been at least a brigade frontage but the marines were proposing to sweep this ground with an under-strength company (one platoon was only at half-strength). To make matters more difficult neither C Squadron nor the Vikings enjoyed perfect line of sight across the area to properly lay down fire support. The axis of advance was south-west and the ground dictated that the marines were naturally channelled by the river and canal. There were dozens of ditches and numerous tree and hedge lines, any one of which could conceal an ambush. Predictably, as one of the troops approached its first objective 400 metres from the line of departure (the village of Hajji Amin Kalay) they came under fire. This village was cleared and the marines pressed on to a prominent ditch line 350 metres further south, known as Phase Line Taunton. By now the locals in surrounding villages had been roused by the gunfire and had joined in the fight.

For the next twelve hours Zulu Company became locked in an unwinnable tussle over a few hundred square metres of muddy fields. Despite artillery fire, as well as support from a pair of Apaches and a Harrier GR.9, the villagers held their line and even began to threaten to outflank the marines. At a critical moment a USN F-18 strafed the enemy positions and accidentally killed Marine Jonathan Wigley. Wigley had joined the Royal Marines at the age of seventeen. He died a twenty-one year old, his entire short adult life dedicated to the service. A second marine almost had his arm ripped off by a cannon shell. This signalled the end of the assault. What began as an attempt to clear the enemy from the area south of Darvishan became a casualty evacuation exercise. Zulu Company eventually made it back to FOB Delhi then spent the night under constant mortar fire from the irate insurgents. The remaining locals in Darvishan fled the town, turning it into a ghost town. The whole operation had been a disaster and a second Now Zad had been created. It would be over a year before the locals had the confidence to return to the town.

While Zulu Company mulled over its next move in Darvishan, the BRF had been sent twenty kilometres to the south to raid a collection of compounds in a village called Koshtay. There were actually two Koshtays within 1,500 metres of each other. The northernmost village was really an extension of the much larger Kuchnay Darvishan, a bazaar built on a canal and sluice gate. The southernmost Koshtay was a hamlet just south of another village called Ziarat-e Soltam Baha. To the west of this constellation of settlements was another village called Ziarat-e Baba Saheb. The area identified from signals and aerial intelligence as the insurgent base was roughly between the two Koshtays near a canal. The problem for the marines was that the only approach to Koshtay was across the Helmand River.

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Operation Talisker – as the mission was called – was the most audacious raid carried out by the marines during their tour and was reminiscent of classic commando raids.[385] As the marines had no boats it was decided to swim the 100 metre wide river, despite the fact that at this time of year the waters were icy. This would involve stripping off at the home bank, wading across the river with equipment floated as improvised rafts, and then dressing again on the far bank. On the return journey the procedure would have to be repeated. The raid was conducted in the early hours of the morning on 10 January, and to avoid detection just one troop crossed the river. This group then had to cross over two kilometres of very broken and boggy ground, in complete darkness, before reaching an observation position near a sluice gate by a canal, about 250 metres short of the suspected

insurgent compound.

The marines reached this point at about four o'clock in the morning. Two snipers were then tasked to shoot sentries seen on the MX-15 surveillance camera of a Nimrod MR2 supporting the raid. Although the raid commander Captain Milne had no visual downlink he did have radio communications with the aircraft. The gunfire awakened the area and Milne decided to play his trump card straightaway; 12,000 pounds of high explosives dropped in one pass from a USAF B-1B. The British were culturally coy about firepower, and sometimes criticised their American ally on this score, except when it suited them. The fact was that no British aircraft could simultaneously drop this amount of GPS-guided bombs in a single pass, and as importantly loiter in the area to allow the ground troops to line up the attack. The thump and flash of the bombs was breathtaking. A pair of Apache then fired off Hellfire missiles and rocket pods at the smoking buildings. The original plan involved crossing the canal and searching the area but Captain Milne changed his mind and decided to withdraw. Individuals did in fact survive the bombing: the surveillance camera on the Nimrod MR2 recorded 'hot spots' fleeing the area. Captain Milne wisely never tested just how many fighters did emerge unscathed from the bombardment. Had he done so, he might have been in for a shock – the shock that Zulu Company was about to experience further north.

Four days after the Koshtay raid the marines in Garmsir once again decided to take the fight to the Taliban by assaulting one of their strongholds called Jugroom Fort, just six kilometres south of FOB Delhi. The aim of Operation Glacier Two was to raid the fort and destroy whatever insurgent infrastructure might be found at the site before retiring to the relative safety of the forward operating base. The operation was again led by Colonel Robert Magowan, and included the BRF and C Squadron from the Light Dragoons. The assaulting force would be drawn from Zulu Company supported by the Armoured Support Squadron in Vikings. The latter's mission was to drive the marines onto the objective.

Raiding Jugroom Fort presented the marines with serious problems, not least the size of the objective and the ground. The name itself was somewhat misleading. There was an old mud brick fort at this spot but it sat within a cluster of villages and compounds. Just 800 metres north of the fort were two hamlets with no names recorded on the maps. North of these were a further three villages called Hajji Ne'matollah Kalay, Molloyanu Kur and Gholam Mohammad Kur. In an immediate 500 metre radius of the fort there were perhaps fifty structures or buildings of one type or another, many protected by the traditional perimeter wall. This was at least a reinforced battlegroup objective (two years later, an

American regimental-sized force finally captured Jugroom Fort). Colonel Magowan was proposing to undertake the raid with one company.

If this was not challenging enough, the fort had been purposely sited to create difficulties for any assaulting force. The only realistic approach was from the south-western flank, effectively attacking the rear of the fort, but this entailed crossing very difficult ground. The marines would have to ford the Helmand River, negotiate another 300 metres of boggy ground criss-crossed by numerous ditches, ford a second water feature, and finally cross 200 metres of open ground south of the fort. The distance from the western bank of the River Helmand – the marines' line of departure – and the southern edge of the fort was over 600 metres. This ground was in a slight bowl at the end of which was the fort itself. In effect the marines were going to advance down a gallery range, or what was for the defenders a near perfect killing area. This could only be attempted in darkness which would make the task even more treacherous.

The real flaw in the scheme to raid Jugroom Fort, however, lay in the supporting fire plan. The history of 20th century warfare is littered with parables of commanders who placed near-religious faith in the power of high explosives only to reap grave disappointment. The formula that tricked these commanders was seductively simple: if sufficient shells and bombs are landed on the head of your enemy, then, surely, victory must follow. The effects of high explosives, paradoxically, are more subtle. To compound the general ignorance, the artillery arm had traditionally indulged in self-promotion, casting itself as 'the God of War', rather than offering a realistic view of the strengths and weaknesses of artillery fire.

Despite the many millions of tons of high explosives expended in the First World War, serious study of the effects of such extravagant ammunition expenditures was only attempted in the Second World War, and in its aftermath. Summarised, the studies concluded that the effects of high explosive bombardments on human beings were mainly based on three factors: proximity, density and duration. Taken together these defined the intensity of the bombardment. The apocryphal cry 'Damn the effects! It's the sounds I want!' carried a germ a truth. It was the proximity to, as well as the rate and duration of bangs experienced, that affected a soldier's capacity to resist and fight. What had consistently caused dismay to exponents of barrages and bombardments was that the enemy survived, and second, that he fought back almost immediately. In fact, studies showed that the 'suppression effect' only lasted between 10-100 seconds. After this period of dislocation the enemy was trigger-ready. To truly suppress an enemy a minimum

bombardment lasting four hours and employing hundreds of guns was reckoned to be necessary. Even then, results could not be guaranteed. The famous El Alamein bombardment involved 882 guns firing nearly continuously for twelve hours. A minimum of ten guns was directed at each German target. After the battle it was discovered that the casualties inflicted by the fire plan were not heavy and many German weapons in fact survived. German and Italian defenders recovered once the barrage passed inflicting around 30 per cent casualties on the British attackers who barely managed to advance one mile across the front. By the end of the war, the Soviet Army was massing 200 guns *per kilometre* of frontage to achieve breakthroughs.

Bearing this in mind, the reader may be taken aback to learn that in support of Operation Glacier Two it was proposed to mount a fire plan with just three guns and a handful of 81mm mortars. These would have no effect at all against the thick walls of Jugroom Fort. Indeed the only effect this fire plan was likely to have was to alert the locals that something was afoot, and to encourage them to take cover or quit the area altogether, which is what they appeared to do. To make matters worse, the area of Jugroom Fort had numerous trenches, tunnels and bunkers which gunmen could use to take cover. The climax of the fire plan involved dropping twenty 2,000 pound bombs on the fort. This was a thumping finale but would almost certainly be entirely wasted. Local fighters would be underground or gone. The fire plan was exactly the wrong use of high explosives.

A second flaw to the fire plan was the difficult ground that would prevent Zulu Company from ‘leaning into’ the barrage. Every world war veteran knew that to exploit a bombardment the infantry must hug or ‘lean into’ its own artillery fire. This lesson had been forgotten in the post-war decades of peace. Zulu Company could not reasonably hope to lean into the barrage over the difficult ground it had to cross. The likelihood was that the company would arrive at the ramparts of the fort and find itself subjected to withering defensive fire. To compound the problem, all the surveillance feeds were being piped into remote viewers in the Tactical HQ. These included a feed from a Nimrod MR2 and a Desert Hawk UAV. The only person with ‘eyes on’ Jugroom Fort was Colonel Magowan himself, seven kilometres away. The Zulu Company commander was blind and would have to wait until ordered to advance.

The artillery bombardment duly started at close to midnight on 14 January and continued until three o’clock the following morning. At this point Colonel Magowan apparently ordered the USAF B-1B bombers to drop their loads. One of the 2,000 pound bombs spectacularly struck a section of the southern wall and created a breach which the

marines would later use to enter the fort. At this point Zulu Company should have attacked. Instead the Zulu Company commander was recalled to the Tactical HQ to be given verbal confirmation to proceed. It was now four o'clock in the morning. By the time the company commander returned to his men and gave confirmatory orders another hour and a half had elapsed and dawn was breaking. By the time Zulu Company reached its departure lines on the Helmand River it was six o'clock and daylight was breaking.[386] Three hours had elapsed between the end of the bombardment and the arrival of the assaulting troops. At this point the assault should have been called off.

Instead, Zulu Company, mounted in the Armoured Support Group Vikings, crossed the river, and like some latter day charge of the Light Brigade rode straight into a hail of machine gun and RPG fire. In fact, the charge was only conducted by two troops as it was deemed that one troop should be kept in reserve on the sand spit on the river Helmand. It was madness, and a minor miracle that more marines were not instantly killed or injured. Within about quarter of an hour five marines were wounded and the company was now faced with the prospect of having to mount a mass casualty evacuation across open ground and under fire. To make matters worse the Bowman radios were packing up, which meant that orders could only be transmitted by shouting. Appreciating the seriousness of the situation the Armoured Support Group and Zulu Company commanders mutually agreed that to continue with the raid would be folly and they requested permission to withdraw. Colonel Magowan granted permission but it then took a further twenty to thirty minutes to pass the order to marines now scattered outside and inside the fort fighting for their lives. In all, the two troops spent about forty-five minutes in this killing area, achieving little more than setting themselves up as targets. A hasty and somewhat chaotic evacuation was organised by Warrant Officer Shepherd, the Zulu Company sergeant major, and the battered marines withdrew back over the river.

Only a short time passed before it was realised that one of the marines, Lance Corporal Mathew Ford, a 'gentle giant', was missing. Then an RAF sergeant monitoring the UAV feed from Desert Hawk spotted the lifeless body of Lance Corporal Ford slumped against the exterior wall of the fort. At the time nobody wanted to believe that he might be dead and, regardless, a rescue mission would still have to be organised to retrieve the body.

Warrant Officer Mark Rutherford, an Apache pilot, was credited for proposing the rescue plan that was eventually adopted, for which he would be awarded a Military Cross. The scheme was daring: two Apache would swoop down on the body carrying four marines strapped to the wings of the aircraft. Lance Corporal Ford's body would be tied to

one of the airframes and the Apaches would return to the safety of the Tactical HQ. Using the Apache helicopters in such an unorthodox way had never been attempted before and by now it was half past nine in the morning. The four men who undertook this hazardous mission, selected for no better reason than they happened to be in the vicinity when the plan was proposed, were: Captain David Rigg, a Royal Engineer officer; Regimental Sergeant Major Hearn; Marine Roberston the Commanding Officer's signaller; and Marine Fraser-Perry who was making a cup of tea at the time. Captain Rigg would receive a gallantry award for the rescue (the Military Cross). For the others there was at least the satisfaction that they had done their duty to a fellow marine.

The operation almost turned into a second disaster. The Apache carrying RSM Hearn and Marine Robertson missed the body altogether and landed inside the fort. The two men jumped off, started running in the wrong direction and had to be retrieved by one of the crew who jumped out of his aircraft and chased after them. The second Apache landed at the right spot but Marine Fraser-Perry became disorientated and also ran off in the wrong direction. Only Captain Rigg found the body and the task of lifting or even dragging the lifeless Lance Corporal Ford proved a physical impossibility. After a terrible struggle and under intermittent fire, Captain Rigg, Marine Fraser-Perry and eventually Warrant Officer Rutherford, who also dismounted his Apache, succeeded in carrying Lance Corporal Ford to the awaiting helicopter. With everyone safely reattached the two Apache withdrew with the ghoulish sight of Lance Corporal Ford's body hanging limply underneath one of the helicopters.

The media went wild over the story. This was just the sort of tale of Royal Marine derring-do the country needed in the depths of the post-Christmas hangover (the story broke in the week that traditionally records the largest number of divorce applications in Britain, such is the depression that appears to afflict Britons in January). What the media did not report was that the Zulu Company commander was relieved of his command and replaced by a newly arrived major. This was an injustice. The raid on Jugroom Fort was always crazily over-ambitious. The plan – and crucially the fire plan – had been devised by Colonel Magowan, not the Zulu Company commander. The company had been tardy at arriving at the fort but this could not be attributed to its commander. And once in the fort there was little Zulu Company could do hampered by a breakdown in their radios and under heavy fire. The marines would never again attempt a similar raid and lessons were learned, but the raid appears to have cost one company commander his job. The British Task Force spokesman, Lieutenant Colonel Rory Bruce, tried to justify the mission with bullish words, but the results were never credible:

‘Our intention was to show the insurgents that they are not safe anywhere, that we are able to reach out to them and attack whenever and wherever we choose, even where they think they are at their safest. To that end, the mission was a success and the insurgents now know we can and will strike at any time.’[387]

Undeterred by this setback, Colonel Magowan continued to probe and attack insurgent positions south of Darvishan. As the insurgents were occupying fixed defensive positions it was possible, with the patient use of assets like UAVs, to build up a detailed picture of the enemy’s routine and dispositions. At the judicious moment these would be attacked by precision weapons, such as the GPS-guided JDAM, often with successful outcomes. What these attacks did not do was alter the situation in any meaningful way. The marines continued to be besieged in the agricultural college and the town remained deserted.

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The final operation undertaken by the marines in Garmsir, at the beginning of March, was Operation Glacier 5.[388] Like the preceding Glacier operations, the aim of the mission was to push away the tide of the insurgent front line, but much like the preceding operations, it proved a Canute-like endeavour. On this occasion it was not for want of ingenuity and guile on the part of the marines. The target in this case was a large village near a bend in the canal that ran to the east of Darvishan. The village was only a thirty minute walk away from Darvishan but was crucially separated by a twenty metre wide irrigation canal with only one crossing to the north. The insurgents calculated that this water obstacle would keep the British at bay and used the village as a launch pad for their attacks. Zulu Company’s plan to attack the village used both surprise and deception. To mask the approach of the marines, which was undertaken in darkness, a diversionary attack was launched in the west and an artillery bombardment was delivered to the north of the objective. While these attacks were taking place Royal Engineers erected a wobbly but serviceable infantry footbridge across the canal.

At H-Hour, and repeating what had now become a standard tactic used by the marines in Darvishan, a massive aerial bombardment was unleashed on the village using B-1B bombers and USN F-18 strike fighters. The scale of the bombardment recalled aerial attacks in Normandy; so much dust was thrown up visibility was reduced to a few metres. And just like Normandy, the defenders recovered quickly from the bombardment, even though one bomb appeared to hit a possible ammunition store sending up a fireball in a secondary detonation. As the marines approached the village they came under sustained but ineffective small arms fire and began to retaliate with artillery and mortar fire. After

Jugroom Fort, the plan was not to enter the village but rather to encourage the gunmen to reveal their positions to better kill them. In effect, Zulu Company was acting as beaters in a grouse shoot, and the shooters were circling American aircraft that despite the fires and dust had good visibility of the compounds. These were not the only eyes on the target as Operation Glacier 5 was also supported by a Predator UAV and Nimrod MR2. Although Zulu Company could not see the feeds, Colonel Magowan could. Satisfied that the marines had done sufficient damage, he ordered Zulu Company back across the canal.

In a stroke of luck, a large number of fighters congregated in a single building, well known to marines as Objective Vodka. An F-18 that remained on station was ordered to bomb the building. The resulting catastrophic explosion was spectacular suggesting that another arms dump may have been hit. About thirty fighters were believed to have been killed in this single strike. It was a terrible blow to the hostile villagers who had believed they were safe on the east bank of the canal. Subsequent UAV and aircraft feeds showed fighters travelling south in scattered groups, apparently shaken by the scale of the attack. As in previous operations, the respite from insurgent attacks lasted about a week, then the cycle of tit-for-tat violence resumed.

If the marines were holding the line in the south and centre, and even managing to take the fight to the enemy, in the far north another twist to the story unfolded. The Kajaki 'security bubble' was about to be expanded and Now Zad was stalemated, but the town located halfway between these two locations – Musa Qaleh – fell to the Taliban in January. Led by Mullah Abdul Ghaffour, who had reportedly become angered by American air strikes, the insurgents over-ran the police station, expelled the elders, and staged a few hangings *pour encourager les autres*. Some reporting suggested that Taliban from Sangin had been involved taking orders from Pakistan.[389] Mullah Abdul Ghaffour would himself be killed by an air strike but the town would not be reclaimed by ISAF until the end of the year. For the British, the collapse of the Musa Qaleh deal was a serious blow. The Americans had never believed in the British 'hands-off' policy and this latest twist seemed to confirm their reservations. Brigadier Thomas could only watch the situation unfold knowing that without further reinforcements – it would take a full brigade operation to recapture Musa Qaleh – there was little he could do. By the beginning of the year 3 Commando Brigade was already stretched to breaking point just holding on to the few gains it had made. The series of operations that were undertaken over January and February to push the insurgents away from Kajaki and Darvishan, as well as the final operation to retake Sangin, could never have taken place if the marines had been ordered

to expel the Taliban from Musa Qaleh. There were simply not enough troops.

Even in the depths of a miserable Afghan winter 3 Commando Brigade felt there was some cause for optimism. The marines had managed to train up two ANA battalions of 3/205 Brigade. Security might be handed back to the Afghans if this effort were reinforced. From the perspective of the Task Force HQ the enemy in turn appeared to have been weakened. This was wishful thinking; the fighting season was over and this seasonal aspect to the fighting in Afghanistan, more than any other factor, accounted for the drop in insurgent activity. British intelligence reading the runes saw enemy morale falling when all that was plummeting was the temperature. Even in the fighting off-season, Helmand could be a dangerous place. The brigade eventually suffered twelve fatalities and eighty-four wounded over the course of the winter fighting. Only two of the fatalities had been caused by roadside bombs, and one fatality – Marine Gary Wright – had been killed by a suicide bomber in Lashkar Gah at the start of the tour. Despite Thomas's intention to avoid unnecessary fighting, it had been a violent six months. There had been 821 gun battles (300 more than the paratroopers experienced in the summer) and over one million pounds of high explosives had been expended, including over 30,000 shells and mortar bombs. Supporting aircraft had dropped 750 tons of bombs in over 200 air strikes. 42 Commando alone had expended 21,000 81mm mortar bombs and 11,000 105mm shells.

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Setting aside these statistics of military effort, independent polling suggested that any optimism in Helmand was premature. Indeed, what most polls seemed to indicate was that the British entry into Helmand had been a disaster which had provoked a province-wide insurrection. Four out of ten Afghans believed that the Taliban had become stronger and a majority of Afghans believed that the government should negotiate a peace settlement with the insurgent movement.[390] Just over half supported the idea of a coalition government, undermining notions that the Taliban were viewed by ordinary Afghans as irredeemably beyond the pale of political accommodation.[391] This accommodation did not imply enthusiasm for the return of a Taliban government: support for Taliban rule, nationwide, oscillated around the five per cent mark for the duration of the war. In the south-west however this support increased and in Kandahar, the spiritual home of the movement, 88 per cent of Afghans wanted political settlement with the Taliban. In fact, the Taliban had never truly been expelled from this city and a surreptitious 'Talibanization' had long been underway in Kandahar. This reassertion of Taliban power, set against the weak central government, inevitably leaked into neighbouring Helmand province. One

quarter of Afghans reported Taliban in their district, and one in ten judged that they had a strong influence in their area.[392]

Depressingly for ISAF, polling indicators suggested a decline in support for ISAF and an increase in support for the Taliban, especially in the south-west. In 2006, three quarters of Afghans living in the south-west opposed the Taliban. Within a year, only half opposed the Taliban and almost fifteen per cent supported the movement.[393] In the same period, confidence in the police had collapsed by 29 per cent and there had been an alarming 37 per cent decline in reported support for Western forces. Most tellingly, confidence in the government's ability to provide security had dropped by 20 per cent and confidence in Taliban provision of security had risen by 19 per cent - the Taliban, and not ISAF, were winning control of the people.[394] These numbers could not be casually dismissed as mere statistics. The British themselves became assiduous pollsters, running monthly surveys in Helmand. It was not always clear whether British civil and military policy makers actually read the analyses of these polls or whether they sought to understand their implications.

Reconstruction and development had been a grave disappointment. Some minor refurbishment had been undertaken in Lashkar Gah hospital and in eleven schools. Wells had been dug, a few bridges repaired and generators distributed. In total, around fifty modest projects had been started. No reconstruction, however, was taking place in the volatile areas of Helmand where it was most needed. This was akin to adding a fresh coat of paint to a hospital and some schools in Tunbridge Wells and expecting the people in a deprived estate in Hull to applaud. Even the residents of Lashkar Gah stirred when a pot of reconstruction money was controversially spent building a recreation park on the west bank of the Helmand River (in fact, the refurbishment of an existing, disused park with a Ferris wheel). If any single project illustrated the gulf between British reconstruction and the reality of Helmand province in the early days of the war, it was the notorious $800,000 Bolan Park project. The project seemed to come about because it to 'ticked boxes' in DfID forms rather than because it served any pressing need in a war zone. The park was supposed to provide an outlet for women ('empowerment' of women was a DfiD millennium goal). Leaving aside the laughableness of Western interference in Helmand's deeply conservative, male-dominated culture, Lashkar Gah's womenfolk, it was pointed out, could not reach the park anyway without a male chaperone. It was an ignominious end to a year of meaningless British non-reconstruction in the Afghan Development Zone.

Brigadier Thomas had sought to fight a mobile counter-insurgency campaign but in the end found himself fixed like his predecessor Ed Butler. Without more troops, better intelligence, and crucially more helicopters, the options were always going to be limited. The reality that the British had provoked a general insurrection was not acknowledged, which was the bigger failing. A hopeless and hostile governor, an equally feeble British reconstruction effort, continuing American sweep operations, and the marines' own aggressive operations, had all ultimately undermined the mission and deflected Thomas from his original intention, which was to support the ADZ between Lashkar Gah and Gereshk. But what Thomas did not do was add to the British 'footprints'. Not a single additional base was invested, and indeed Thomas sought albeit unsuccessfully to withdraw from some of the 'platoon houses'. His was the only brigade that would be able to make this claim. Despite all the impediments, Thomas had stuck to a philosophy of mobile warfare. When 3 Commando Brigade handed over to its successors in the spring of 2007 there was still the chance of 'unfixing the force'. A political settlement was still on the cards, if only political actors on the British and Afghan side would step forward to end the unhappy situation in Helmand. None did, and the chance to 'unfix the force' once and for all would not be taken because the successors – 12 Mechanised Brigade – arrived with a quite different view of how to win the war in Helmand.

CHAPTER 5
TAKE THE FIGHT TO THE ENEMY
Operation HERRICK 6
6 April 2007 – October 2007

The spring of 2007 marked an important milestone for Britain's armed forces. The attention, however, was not on Helmand, but rather hundreds of kilometres away in Basra. Desperate to reduce the political liability of a deeply unpopular war the outgoing Blair government began the process of British withdrawal from southern Iraq - a retreat in some eyes - that would prove almost as controversial as the original invasion. The speed with which this happened was precipitate. On 8 April British forces handed over their base at the old Shatt-Al-Arab Hotel to the 10th Division of the Iraqi Army. Ten days later an announcement was made that the troubled Maysan Province, which the British had never successfully controlled anyway, had been handed back to Iraqi authorities. A week later, the giant Shaibah Logistics Base just outside Basra City was also handed over to the Iraqi Army. British forces were now based in just two locations: at the airport and in the symbolically important Basra Palace. American pressure kept the British locked up in this toehold which no longer held any military value except for an American special operations contingent monitoring growing Iranian influence in Basra Province. For the insurgents, Basra Palace had become a mortar range. For the soldiers of the Rifles, the last British regiment to serve inside the city before the final British withdrawal, conditions were miserable. The palace received daily attacks and there was little the British could do except take cover and accept the steady trickle of casualties. Every re-supply was a major operation. As one jaundiced observer noted, people were dying just to deliver toilet paper to the soldiers.

This intolerable situation could not be sustained but the British still needed some face-saving solution to quit the city once and for all. The deal that was struck proved controversial. In return for a prisoner release, including a prominent insurgent leader, a pledge was made that the British could leave Basra Palace unmolested by the insurgents. Anxious not to hand over the buildings to extremists, it was also agreed that the Iraqi

Army would assume control of the palace. In September the Rifles finally withdrew to Basra Airport, flags flying defiantly from their vehicles. True to their word, the insurgents allowed the British free passage. The British government portrayed the withdrawal as part of a staged plan to hand over security to the Iraqi Army but few believed the spin. For the Americans, the British had been ‘defeated’. For the government of Nouri Al-Maliki, the British had proved a let-down. In Baghdad, British officers had to suffer the daily embarrassment of having to explain the British position to sceptical Americans. The central justification – that the Iraqis were capable of maintaining their own security – later appeared hollow when an Iraqi-led operation to clear insurgent groups from Basra collapsed. The British-mentored Iraqi troops had to be stiffened by American soldiers sent south to restore the situation. The British commander was not even in the country when these events unfolded, having taken leave. Such was the inglorious end to Operation Telic.

If the story in Iraq was one of retreat, in Afghanistan the army was about to engage in its biggest killing spree since the first Gulf War. By the end of its six month tour, 12 Mechanised Brigade would claim to have killed over 2,000 Taliban and foreign fighters. The body count was exaggerated but it was true that a level of violence had been visited in some districts of Helmand, not experienced since the Soviet occupation. Before Operation Herrick 6, the two sides had been trading punches. In the summer of 2007, the British dynamited the ring. The outcomes of this period of incessant fighting would be profound. The British would be led into thinking their war was winnable. The tribesmen would retrench, re-think tactics, and emerge stronger.

12 Mechanised Brigade was commanded by the forty-three year old Brigadier John Lorimer, a Cambridge graduate and Arabist who had already commanded the brigade over a difficult tour in Basra in the previous summer. The Lorimers, it seemed, were drawn to the Middle East - the newly-arrived brigadier was the great-grandson of an Edwardian Arabist.

John Lorimer was a paratrooper who combined innate intelligence with the aggressive ethos of the Parachute Regiment. Operation Herrick 6 would mark a sort of early apogee in the British campaign in Helmand. No other brigade would mount as many offensive operations, with as much ambition and sweep, as 12 Mechanised Brigade in the summer of 2007. Much of this was due to the brigade commander who proved a vigorous leader. Confident in his abilities, and served by a team of equally capable commanding officers, he set a relentless tempo of operations despite numerous difficulties with equipment and in particular awful problems with the Bowman communications system. He was the only

Helmand brigadier who took his brigade to war in Iraq and Afghanistan and this may have reinforced his confidence. A lesser commander may have played his hand more cautiously but Lorimer did not allow the frictions of war to deflect him from his purpose. In this he resembled commanders from a bygone age, before risk aversion and casualty minimisation became guiding imperatives of the Western way of warfare.

The aggressive approach seemed to pay off, or so the British first thought. 12 Mechanised Brigade did not 'butcher and bolt' in the manner of early 20th century, punitive, expeditionary campaigns, but the brigade clearly thumped the tribes in northern Helmand. Six brigade operations and a score of battlegroup operations were mounted. No other brigade inflicted as much damage or killed as many fighters, whether genuine Taliban or local 'ten dollar Talibs'. The brigade forced insurgent gangs to lie low and it was in no small measure thanks to the offensive operations conducted over the summer of 2007 that the successor brigade 52 (Lowland) Brigade was able to enjoy such a quiet tour that winter. That this did not prove to be a winning tactic in Helmand was down to three principal factors.

First, there was no credible and resourced plan to exploit military operations with reconstruction and development programs. The civilians were still at the tail of the column and in no hurry to catch up with the vanguard. For this reason the 12 Mechanised Brigade tour would be remembered as an exercise in 'mowing the lawn', an ultimately futile activity as the valley tribesmen experienced fighting but no reconstruction. This would decisively turn local opinion against the British, especially in the Upper Gereshk and Sangin Valleys. Here, the tribes never forgave the actions of 12 Mechanised Brigade and every subsequent brigade paid for this in revenge-taking. Second, the Afghan security forces were in no shape to support let alone consolidate British clearance operations. Western military clout without 'an Afghan face' was always going to appear as naked aggression that had to be resisted. And lastly, the point of this campaigning was now no longer to interdict 'the Taliban' and push the trouble away from the ADZ, as 3 Commando Brigade had attempted, but to establish more British bases in the contested areas. No other brigade would ever be able to match the operational tempo of 12 Mechanised Brigade because no other brigade possibly could: the manning bill for the expanding number of patrol bases would effectively fix the force in dispersed locations across Helmand. Over time, Task Force Helmand would become static, hugely expensive to sustain, and without a sufficient mobile arm. The seeds for this were sown by 12 Mechanised Brigade. The argument that Afghans saw security in terms of numbers of bases was persuasive but it did

not disaffirm the need for mobile operations. Nor did it mean that British soldiers had to man the bases. In this respect, Lorimer repeated Johnson's mistake in Vietnam - their war became our war. The mantras of Ed Butler and Jerry Thomas – that this was an Afghan war that had to be fought by Afghans – were buried. The dictum that Task Force Helmand had to be 'unfixed' was discarded. As a consequence, every succeeding brigade was forced to follow in Lorimer's path, including 52 Brigade that tried to reverse course.

Much criticism of the brigade, however, was harsh. Insufficient troops - and crucially poor FCO and DfID support - could not be laid on the shoulders of Brigadier Lorimer. In the autumn of 2006, in answer to mounting concerns, the Prime Minister had loosely promised unlimited support for the war in Afghanistan: 'If the commanders on the ground want more equipment, armoured vehicles for example, more helicopters, that will be provided. Whatever package they want, we will do.' This was an empty flourish that embarrassingly backfired. In preparation for Operation Herrick 6, the staffs of 12 Mechanised Brigade presented a list of requirements that included a squadron of Challenger 2 tanks, a company of Warrior armoured personnel carriers, a troop of AS-90 guns and an additional battalion of infantry. The request was rejected and subsequently leaked to the media. This provoked a minor storm forcing the MOD to issue a statement on Lorimer's behalf asserting that he was neither 'angry nor frustrated'. The statement disingenuously added that the request had not been rejected as no decisions had been made. The fact was that Brigadier Lorimer's request for additional resources was never going to be accepted. The embattled Tony Blair was in the last months of his premiership and his likely successor, the Chancellor Gordon Brown, was intent on reducing, not enlarging, the British commitment to Afghanistan – an intent that would be dashed when Gordon Brown finally assumed power that summer.

Other actors entered the picture over this crucial summer. On 17 May, Sherard Cowper-Coles took over as the new British ambassador in Kabul. Cowper-Coles proved a controversial character despite his jovial public persona. He seemed ill at ease with the military. On a flight to Helmand he ungenerously recorded in his FCO blog that some army officers were reading books, pretentiously in his view, as if surprised that army officers might just be intelligent and reflective. His main role in the play would be to act as a brake on military operations, taking his cue from a nervous government that sought to limit British commitments and casualties. Later in the war he would be mischievously and in his testimony wrongly quoted by a French satirical newspaper, suggesting that the war was lost. After retiring from the FCO he would write a book critical of the entire strategy in Afghanistan and of what he perceived to be military dominance of Whitehall.

In other respects, Cowper-Coles' case was strong. He held a deep and justified suspicion of optimistic military reporting. Unlike his military counterparts, he could not see the reasons for optimism and was dismayed by the steady stream of reports suggesting progress. He strenuously argued for a political not a military solution – a point that few could argue against, but which was proving as difficult to achieve as a military win.

Cowper-Coles' argument with optimistic military reporting echoed Vietnam-era concerns, worth quoting at length because they point to an important truth about the 'military mentality':

'Such men [senior officers] are likely to find it almost impossible to recognize and to acknowledge [the] existence of a situation seriously adverse to their assigned mission. It is contrary to their lifetime training never to be daunted. This characteristic makes them good leaders for difficult missions but it does not especially qualify them for rendering dispassionate judgements of the feasibility of missions…moreover, the U.S. officials in positions of operational responsibility had a professional commitment to programs which, often, they had had a hand in establishing. This normally inhibited them from giving the worst interpretation to evidence that was incomplete, ambiguous or inconclusive… moreover, the public relations aspects of most positions of operating responsibility make it seem necessary to put a good face on things as part of that operating responsibility. The morale of the organization seems to demand it. Finally, the intelligence provided on an official basis generally followed formats devised for uniform formal compilation and standard statistical treatment. All along the line, lower echelons were judged, rewarded or penalized by higher echelons in terms of the progress revealed by the reports they turned in. This practice encouraged and facilitated feeding unjustifiably optimistic data into the reporting machinery.'[395]

As a warning of the temptations and dangers of spinning a war, this forty year old paragraph from the Pentagon Papers remains hard to beat.

Cowper-Coles was also an astute observer of the many petty follies of the war: the lucrative and quite mendacious Afghanistan conference industry, fuelled by good lunches in expensive restaurants; the circus of Western Third World 'experts' lining their pockets from the distress of others; the endless co-ordination meetings by Westerners for Westerners; the pernicious effects of the six weeks on and two weeks off work routine and the obsession with allowances; the spurious appeals to health and safety (in a war zone);

the hollowness of the Helmand Plan; the pointless production line of PowerPoints, as if the war could be won by accumulating bullet points, to invoke Maxwell Taylor's quip from the Vietnam War; and not least the turgid language of British Army staff work, so far removed from the plain English of previous generations; all this he recorded drolly in his memoirs.

The new Defence Secretary, Des Browne, re-entered the story, now more forcefully. Like his predecessor, a Catholic Scotsman and Celtic supporter, Browne was known as a 'safe pair of hands'. He proved to be a hugely influential Defence Secretary, not only for his longevity (he served from 5 May 2006 to 3 October 2008) but because he persuaded the Treasury to open the purse strings and then presided over the biggest re-armament program in the British Army since the Korean War.

The last character, who would have a significant influence on attitudes towards the war, was General Richard Dannatt, the recently appointed Chief of the General Staff (CGS). Dannatt, a former Green Howard, took over in the autumn of 2006, just as Operation Herrick 4 was winding down. He quickly courted controversy by making strong remarks about the rationale of British operations in Basra. A strongly committed Christian, Dannatt would do more to raise the profile of his army than any other senior officer. In this respect it may be judged that Dannatt was the most influential CGS of his generation. In doing so he became a thorn in the Labour government's side and ultimately sacrificed his own career.

12 Mechanised Brigade arrived in Helmand in un-seasonal cold weather and heavy downpours. The threat of a Taliban spring offensive was in the air. According to Governor Wafa, over 700 insurgents had crossed over from Pakistan and were heading for Sangin. These included Chechens and Arabs as well as Pakistanis.[396] Mullah Dadullah, the most able Taliban tactical commander in south-west Afghanistan, was promising a summer of violence on Al-Jazeera television and offering gold to anyone who killed ISAF soldiers. There were rumours of a mass suicide bomber offensive.

With the deployment of the brigade the British task force levels rose again to around 5,800 strong. Helmand was now divided into three battlegroup areas of responsibility: north, centre and south. The two Commando battalions were replaced by three infantry battalions: 1 Royal Anglian commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Carver; the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters (about to be renamed the 2 Mercians under the Army downsizing program), commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Richard Westley; and the

Grenadier Guards commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Carew Hatherley. The latter unusually deployed with a Second Lieutenant Folarin Kuku, the regiment's first black officer in its 350 year history.[397] Armoured reconnaissance continued to be provided by a squadron from the Light Dragoons. The brigade was also supported by a 140 strong Somme Company from the London Regiment, an impressive commitment from reservist soldiers.

The infantry battalions themselves were also substantially augmented. 1 Royal Anglian's three line companies were doubled with a Grenadier Guards company (Number 3 Company), a Danish company and an Estonian company. 1 Royal Anglian was also supported by a company from the Theatre Reserve Battalion (C Company, 2 Royal Regiment of Fusiliers). To make up numbers additional infantrymen were recruited from the Gibraltar Regiment, a sister regiment (in fact, infantrymen from eight different regiments served in 1 Royal Anglian, an indication of just how over-stretched the down-sized infantry had become). In total the battlegroup jumped from a normal peacetime strength of about 600 to over 1,500 all ranks. The Viking 'battlefield taxis' used by the marines were left behind in Helmand, with their marine drivers. 1 Royal Anglian was allocated one troop of these vehicles. The battlegroup was also the first to receive a company's-worth of Mastiffs, a 28 ton vehicle with significant levels of protection.

1 Royal Anglian companies were initially deployed to the British 'footprints' across Helmand. A (Norfolk) Company was deployed to Now Zad; B (Suffolk) Company occupied FOB Robinson; C (Essex) Company invested Kajaki Dam; and D (Cambridgeshire) Company assumed the reconnaissance and support weapon roles. A Royal Anglian contingent was also deployed to the multi-national FOB Price near Gereshk where they were joined by Inkerman Company of the Grenadier Guards. Guardsmen from Queen's Company and Number 2 Company were sent to Camp Shorabak, the ANA camp built adjacent to Camp Bastion, where they would act as mentors for the 1st Battalion of the ANA 3/205 Heroes Brigade. The guardsmen were quick to notice that their Afghan charges had 'a fairly lax approach to uniform… punctuality, or indeed any of the normal traits one associates with good military men' but that they made good 'scrappers'.[398] The Brigade Reconnaissance Force was relocated to Camp Bastion where it was judged it might be better employed from this more central location. Over the course of the next six months soldiers would find these were only temporary homes as the brigade mounted a series of offensive operations that demanded the rapid relocation of platoons and companies from one base to another.

For Brigadier Lorimer the important task was to seize the initiative. The British deployment to Helmand had been surprised by the level of resistance it met. It had clung by its fingernails to a number of outposts in the face of daily attacks. It had battened down during the bitter Afghan winter. Now it was time to play the game in the enemy's half again, and not be too concerned by 'worriers' fretting in the stands. The mission had not changed. The British task was to create security in the increasingly questionable Afghan Development Zone, to promote reconstruction and development, and to encourage better governance. Even as the fresh brigade arrived, Sangin had 'fallen' to 3 Commando Brigade which seemed to auger well for the new fighting season. In fact, what had happened was that the local resistance in the town had simply melted back into the Green Zone. This was where Brigadier Lorimer was determined to make a difference. 12 Mechanised Brigade would not nibble at the edges of the Green Zone, in the manner of 3 Commando Brigade. The new brigade would break through the crust of the enemy defences, join the towns of Lashkar Gah, Gereshk and Sangin and create an enduring presence in the Green Zone. Afghans respected 'boots on the ground', or so it was judged, and this meant marching into the enemy's territory and building bases right on his doorstep. So the brigade marched off to war, floating on ideas that sounded good on paper, and to the trumpet blasts of military terms that like arrows drawn on maps made perfect sense in a parallel world of wishful thinking, but made less sense in the real world of Helmand's fields and villages.

Lorimer intended to 'hit the ground running' and 12 Mechanised Brigade certainly did that. Sergeant Parr serving with Chin Troop of 127 Gun Battery was asked to fire his gun within twenty-seven minutes of arriving at FOB Robinson, which probably set a record for bringing a gun into action on arrival at a forward operating base.[399] This troop was commanded by a female officer, Lieutenant Jenny White. Within the first few weeks, her troop would fire off a further 927 shells in support of the infantry operating within the range of the guns at FOB Robinson.[400] This artillery support was far more demanding than that experienced on range practices. Not only did the gunners need to acclimatize to the difficult conditions but they were also operating alongside American and Canadian forces, and mutually supporting each other's forces. With each national contingent using slightly different voice procedures, this was a recipe for misunderstandings. 'VP' has almost totemic status in gunnery because it is through an absolute adherence to set voice procedures that mistakes (friendly fire) are avoided. Messing up 'VP' through linguistic confusions was a sin every gunner was keen to avoid.

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Between April and June, the 1 Royal Anglian battlegroup undertook a series of ambitious operations in the Green Zone. To all intents and purposes these were ‘search and destroy’ missions but on a trivial scale compared to Vietnam-era operations. In Operation Junction City (1967), to give one example, a fleet of 200 helicopters was employed. For the majority of their operations, the Royal Anglians were allocated just one – the casualty evacuation helicopter. The aim was to flush out the enemy and to force him to fight or flee. For the British the justification for these operations seemed strong: the wastefulness of ‘mowing the lawn’ would only become apparent later. The widespread use of roadside bombs that would immobilise British soldiers by the following summer had not yet become a feature of Taliban tactics. The display of overwhelming force seemed to intimidate the fighters who put up limited resistance before dispersing. The Royal Anglians actually suffered no fatalities from these mobile operations, which may have reinforced the justification that the tactic was right. By comparison, Suffolk Company would suffer thirteen casualties in just two days in May when it became sucked into fruitless, attritional shooting matches in the Sangin area.[401]

The first of these operations was codenamed Operation Silicon and involved almost 2,000 troops. The operation was one of a series of missions undertaken, still under the umbrella of Operation Achilles, the broader American campaign to wrest northern Helmand Province from imagined Taliban control. The aim was to clear insurgents from a village called Deh-e Adam Khan in the Upper Gereshk Valley, deep in Barakzai tribal lands. Deh-e Adam Khan, known as DAK to the soldiers, was only a ten minute walk away from the hydro-electric dam that provided electricity to the town. Unbeknown to the British, DAK had a long history of violence dating back to the Soviet-Afghan War and in fact would never be subdued. A second village, Habibollah Kalay (where the marines had come unstuck), three kilometres north-east of Deh-e Adam Khan, would also be cleared. This was an especially tricky area due to the broken nature of the ground. Aside from the two targeted villages in what was designated Operations Box Thalatta, there were a string of other settlements in the narrow corridor of land which the Royal Anglians hoped to clear: Shahr-e Kohneh, Sardar, Samedkhan Kalay and Sanchai. Each of these provided ideal cover for fighters. The Royal Anglians may have reflected that this same area had ostensibly been ‘cleared’ by the marines in their very first operation, six months ago, and the old frontline had simply re-asserted itself. The newcomers would have to do it all over again. Six years later, when the last British and Danish soldiers finally quit Gereshk, these

villages had still not been ‘cleared’.

H-Hour was set for 5am on 29 April. As well as the 1 Royal Anglian battlegroup, a troop of Light Dragoons mounted in Scimitar, the Brigade Reconnaissance Force, a Danish reconnaissance squadron, an Estonian mechanised company, and two US special force detachments took part in the operation. Support from US special forces, but not British special forces was unfortunately typical of Task Force Helmand operations in the first half of the war. A total of six ANA companies were also mustered to help search compounds and to act as interpreters. Artillery and mortar support was provided by six Light Guns from 28/143 (Tomb’s Troop), and six mortars from the Royal Anglian mortar platoon. Surveillance was provided by a USAF U2, a Nimrod MR2, two teams of Desert Hawk UAVs, and two Light Electronic Warfare Teams, or LEWTs.

The plan was to push north-east from Gereshk in a convoy of about 100 vehicles, beyond the ring of ANP checkpoints that had been established by 3 Commando Brigade, to clear the rebellious villages, and to establish a new defensive line about five kilometres further north of the town. The entire battlegroup would occupy a desert harbour north of Deh-e Adam Khan on D-Day minus one. Then Norfolk Company would secure a crossing point over a prominent canal and Suffolk Company would clear a three kilometre swathe of Green Zone. If the operation unfolded as planned, Norfolk Company would subsequently clear the village of Habbibolah Kalay on the edge of the Green Zone. At the conclusion of the mission three new patrol bases would be built at kilometre intervals (baptised Malvern, Spondon and Clifton). These would overlook the approaches to Gereshk on the west side of the Helmand River. Concurrently with the ground advance, a heliborne assault would be mounted on the village of Hyderabad by Task Force 1 Fury, a further ten kilometres north. Hyderabad, a mixed Ashakzai, Barakzai and Ishaqzai settlement, was situated on the banks of the Helmand River and was long suspected of harbouring insurgents. It was hoped that the heliborne assault would both disrupt and distract while the main offensive took place in the south.

It was estimated that 1 Royal Anglian might face ‘up to 1,000 fighters’, an exaggeration, but Operation Silicon still turned out to be a hard slog due to the resistance of the Barakzai villagers.[402] One of the memorable features of this operation was actually the weather, rather than tribesmen shooting back at the soldiers: the battlegroup had to endure a sandstorm, followed by a rain storm, followed by sapping heat. Even before the fighting started the battlegroup suffered a setback when it was discovered that the bridge Suffolk Company intended to cross was in fact blocked to vehicles, forcing the Marine

Armoured Support Group to re-route further west. Suffolk Company crossed on foot, separated from its fire support and soon became engaged by villagers. Most of the fighting experienced by the soldiers involved random shooting matches against an invisible enemy. At first the countryside would seem peaceful. Then a tree line would erupt with gun fire and a battle would follow that could last for several hours.

The clearance of Deh-e Adam Khan encountered early and stiff resistance that brought Suffolk Company's advance to a complete standstill. An Apache tasked to provide fire support refused to engage because it could not identify the gunmen's positions.[403] Eventually a Harrier GR.9 dropped a 500 pound on a tree line which was suspected to be concealing fighters but the bomb proved to be a dud. The aircraft circled again and dropped a 1,000 pound Paveway II. This second bomb did detonate with a great crash that scattered debris over a wide radius. After this show of force, resistance ended in the south but the company continued to receive effective fire from the north. As the company pushed on, one of the platoons – 6 Platoon – managed to dislodge some fighters from a compound only to be surrounded and cut-off from the remainder of the company by angry villagers. The company now found itself embroiled in confusing, close range gun battles and unable to make progress.

By the early afternoon a decision was taken to clear Habibollah Kalay with Norfolk Company to relieve the pressure on Suffolk Company. Habibollah Kalay proved to be deserted and it became apparent that fighters were beginning to drift away as the day drew to a close. The reconnaissance platoon overlooking the area from the north enjoyed a late afternoon duck shoot as a group of gunmen were spotted withdrawing east but this was the last of the action. Suffolk Company – that had spent the entire day bogged down at Deh-e Adam Khan - was now ordered forward to join Norfolk Company. Although the distance was no more than three kilometres, it was an order grudgingly accepted by the exhausted soldiers.

For the majority of soldiers who took part in the operation, the villagers proved an elusive foe. Private Muhammad Khan serving with the Royal Anglians and acting as the 'eyes and ears' at the front of his patrol, remembered spotting the enemy on only one occasion. Mostly, he recollected the heat, the weight of the equipment, and the exhaustion. [404]

The only casualties suffered by the Royal Anglians were two soldiers who collapsed with heat exhaustion and a third who was hit by shrapnel. This was a very cheap victory. Most of the fighters who were killed appeared to have been caught by Apache at the end

of the day as they attempted to leave the area. Despite the expenditure of tens of thousands of bullets and thousands of pounds of high explosives over the course of the day just eight dead fighters were found.[405] A further three wounded Afghans were evacuated to Camp Bastion field hospital. This did not stop the battalion from reporting it had killed at least ninety-five insurgents but that the true figure was probably much higher.[406] The tendency to exaggerate kill counts remained an irresistible temptation to British commanders.

A Grenadier Guards officer mentoring an ANA company found that one of his biggest challenges was restraining the Afghan soldiers who were far less cautious than their British counterparts. Approaching a village on one occasion, the company received a volley of three RPGs and then became pinned down by mortar fire. Women and children had been spotted in the area so it was not possible to retaliate with counter-mortar fire. Eventually a heavy weight of machine gun fire appeared to drive off the gunmen. At this point the ANA commander ordered a general mount and charged off into the distance leaving behind his guardsmen mentors. Predictably, he drove straight into a second ambush and found himself cut-off from the remainder of his troops. The ensuing gun battle lasted four hours before the trapped ANA could be safely extricated. The Grenadier officer who witnessed this comical display seemed more impressed by the ‘gutsy’ Taliban than by his ANA colleagues.[407]

This incident was not untypical. A year into the war, the reliability of the ANA was already becoming a serious cause of concern for British mentors. The figures being quoted by ISAF for numbers of trained ANA simply did not reflect the reality on the ground. An example of this mismatch was the experience of Lieutenant Colonel Bramble, serving with 19 Regiment Royal Artillery, 100 kilometres away to the south in FOB Dwyer. Bramble’s job was to train Afghan gunners but just holding on to his students was proving the bigger challenge. Paying the ANA their overdue wages only served to encourage the Afghan soldiers to desert. The best incentive to retain the soldiers was a certificate. Afghan soldiers placed great value on receiving a certificate from the British Army, however meaningless. Still, the numbers of soldiers he was training remained pitifully small. Just six ANA gunners were presented certificates for attending command and observation post courses.[408] It is worth recalling that at this time ISAF was claiming that over 40,000 ANA had been trained, although it also conceded that only about 22,000 were ‘consistently present for combat duties’.[409] Judging from Lieutenant Colonel Bramble’s experiences even this number may have been optimistic. The Afghan soldiers, though few in numbers, did at least prove to be enthusiastic gunners. After certificates, what most thrilled the

average Afghan soldier was anything that made a loud bang.

Following Operation Silicon, on 10 May, Lorimer was invited by Governor Wafa to address a shura of over 400 of Gereshk's tribal elders. This was the first opportunity for the governor and the British task force commander to speak directly to the tribes. Lorimer's message was one that would be repeated endlessly by British commanders:

'We have provided support through a number of projects in Gereshk in recent months, including investment in health, education and municipal services. In addition the Kajaki dam project will bring new roads, better irrigation and employment to the Upper Gereshk Valley. It is a great opportunity which will brighten your future, but it needs your help and can only work if the Taliban are kept out.'

The problem with this message in the spring of 2007 was that it was entirely hollow. Lorimer was in the uncomfortable position of having to make promises to tribesmen who knew very well that the British were all talk and no action. Indeed, Helmandis had jokingly begun to refer to the British as 'the note-takers', observing their propensity for paperwork, but little action. Keeping the Taliban out was not an easy message to sell to the elders when the majority were related to or knew tribesmen who had taken up arms against the British. To consolidate the gains from Operation Silicon a base was built on the edge of the Green Zone: FOB Inkerman. Over time this base would become one of the most notorious and beleaguered of all the British outposts.

Undeterred, the brigade mounted a second operation – Operation Lastay Kulang ('Axe Head') – which took place in the last week of May and ran into the first week of June. Again it involved the 1 Royal Anglian battlegroup supported by Danish, Estonian and American troops. The main objective of the operation was to clear a large village called Putay in Alikozai tribal lands, about twelve kilometres north of Sangin. This village sat in the middle of the Upper Sangin Valley and was a well-known hub for the narcotics trade in the local area. Rivalry between migrating Alizai from the north and the resident Alikozai had soured relations, adding to tensions. Preparations for the operation received a setback when a convoy from Camp Bastion struck a mine that killed Corporal Darren Bonner, a religious man who had been observed reading the Bible on the night before he died.

Using now standard tactics, Lastay Kulang involved a series of sequenced moves by the individual company groups within the battlegroup. Suffolk Company advanced first clearing the area north of Sangin towards Putay. On the first day the company met some resistance and suffered two mine strikes but then the enemy melted away. Further north,

Norfolk Company moved out into the desert east of Putay and waited to strike. To distract the villagers, Essex Company conducted a feint between Putay and Kajaki which acted as cue for an assault by American paratroopers from Task Force 1 Fury, just south of Kajaki. The Brigade Reconnaissance Force and the Royal Anglian's own reconnaissance platoon screened the surrounding desert to catch any fleeing fighters.

With all the companies on their departure lines, Norfolk Company was ordered to clear Putay. Private Ed Garner described the action as they drew close to the first compounds:

'I hopped over a small ditch at the corner and just as I looked up an automatic weapon opened up about 20 metres to my half-right as the rounds thudded into the wall between the 3 of us that had exposed ourselves to the gunman. My world was well and truly in slow-mo as Martin, LCpl Andy Howe, the section commander and I fired on automatic into the tree where the fire had come from. I smiled as some geezer half jumped, half fell out of the tree and scrambled around the corner of the compound at the base. "How did that twat manage to get away?" I joked to Martin.'[410]

What followed was a typical village fight:

'For the next couple of hours we played cat and mouse with several Taliban through alleyways, trenches and little rat-runs like some speeded up Laurel & Hardy film. I'll never forget when I moved around a corner and an enemy RPG gunner saw me and flapped and fired his RPG from the hip landing about 5m in front of him. I don't know who was more scared, me or him, but he somehow got away with it.'

Lance Corporal Bill Drinkwater describing the ensuing gun fights, unintentionally highlighting the inherent contradiction in what the British were attempting to do. The company entered Putay to win 'hearts and minds', but instead, 'all hell broke loose'. The soldiers found themselves dodging salvos of RPGs and unable to cross the open ground because it was being raked by fire from insurgents hiding in a maize field. Eventually, Drinkwater and his mates took cover in a ditch to avoid the 'mayhem', and a US A-10 providing close air support settled the matter.[411] After this display of American air power there was little resistance.

The co-ordination of both the air and artillery support for Operation Lastay Kulang was undertaken from a makeshift fires cell that had been set up at the Sangin District Centre. Such were the difficulties of travel in Helmand that the gunners who made up this team had taken sixteen hours to drive from FOB Price to Sangin, a distance of barely thirty kilometres. When they arrived, Sergeant Steel recalled they were met by a painted sign

that read ‘Welcome to Sangingrad’.[412] The bleak joke raised a smile, despite the ordeal of the journey.

After Norfolk Company secured Putay it was joined by Suffolk Company that had continued its advance north through the Green Zone, also meeting little active resistance. Operation Lastay Kulang eventually ran for over a week but most of the fighters had dispersed back into their local communities. Only the die-hard Taliban tended to stay behind to contest the ground but even these were quick to disappear once aircraft appeared overhead. At the end of the operation the Royal Anglians assessed that they had killed another 200 Taliban, again, a grossly exaggerated claim. The insurgents, in a rare success, managed to down a Chinook, killing seven soldiers, including a British soldier who had hitched a lift on the American helicopter. A new base was built – FOB Fox – that was occupied by the Estonian company, but the level of attacks against this isolated outpost became so great it was eventually abandoned. The operation was closed with a shura, held with the village elders in Putay. It is difficult to imagine what Lieutenant Colonel Carver had to offer to the elders (who were actually keen to co-opt the British into a fight against the rival Alizai). His battlegroup had caused disruption in the valley for eleven days and killed a number of local men. They would now be leaving with nothing more to show than more empty promises of future reconstruction.

To suggest that 12 Mechanised Brigade was simply acting like the biggest bully in the neighbourhood, picking fights, would be an over-simplification. Reflecting on these first two operations Lorimer was clear that the key to success was not the fighting but precisely the reconstruction:

‘When we close with the enemy, with the Taliban, we beat them. But the critical part, as I said before, is what happens after that. It’s the reconstruction and development, which we are taking forward with colleagues from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development on behalf of the government of Afghanistan. Also we’re making sure that the government of Afghanistan get their representatives out on the ground to engage with the locals.’[413]

In truth, this was putting a brave face on an inadequate situation. The British were facing the same problem that had bedevilled the Soviets before them. In the prescient words of a secret CIA memorandum drafted a quarter of a century earlier: ‘A major problem for the Soviets is to convince the tribes that it is to their advantage to support the government.’[414] The same suspicion of central government and empty promises

undermined British efforts to rally the tribes behind Kabul, and much of this failure can be laid on the British themselves, specifically on the ineffectual FCO and DfID.

At Lashkar Gah, a bureaucracy had grown that swelled the brigade HQ to three times its normal peacetime establishment. At the head of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) was the Helmand Executive Group (HEG) led by the FCO's David Slinn. The HEG included the Deputy Commander of Task Force Helmand as well as representatives from the FCO, DfID, the US State Department, USAID (that was actually funding the majority of reconstruction projects in the British area of operations), a counter-narcotics officer, and representatives from Denmark and Estonia. This group was further augmented by a 1st Political Secretary, media officers, legal advisors and finance officers. Despite an outward show of unity it was a disparate body with widely differing agendas. The US State Department was keeping an eye on the British as well as the Taliban. The FCO and DfID appeared to be playing the part of two nervous spinsters trying to avoid anything that might ruffle their ordered worlds. The counter-narcotics officer was caught between a British lack of ideas and an American desire to pursue eradication. Only the Danes seemed to be making any meaningful progress with reconstruction in Gereshk. Between September 2006 and May 2008, a nine strong Danish CIMIC (Civil Military Cooperation) team in Gereshk would implement 255 small to large scale projects; more than the British were managing with their much larger bureaucracy.[415] Six years later, as the ISAF national contingents began their withdrawal an unholy row broke out over infrastructure left behind by PRT-sponsored projects, specifically the British-sponsored projects. It transpired that just 70 per cent of claimed clinics were actually functioning, and of 336 registered 'schools', only 164 were actually open and less than a third had 'proper buildings'. It was telling that the Helmand Education Director Mohammad Nasim Safi who reported this information, also pointed out: 'The schools funded by Denmark…were of a high quality and had been built in the right locations, providing education for a large number of students.'[416] DfID 'success statistics', quoted by politicians in Parliament to demonstrate 'progress' to a sceptical electorate, appear to have been so much spin.

The real problem with the PRT was that it thoughtlessly replanted Kosovo-practices and stabilisation notions in Helmand, totally ignoring the advice of Brigadier Thomas (and General Richards) that ISAF should work with and not against the grain of Afghan culture. Reporting to the HEG was a raft of 'working groups' which seemed to grow in inverse proportion to the reconstruction actually taking place on the ground. In the round there was a Governance Working Group, an Influence Working Group, a Sustainable

Development Working Group, a Security Sector Reform Working Group, a Stabilisation Working Group, and a Counter-Narcotics Working Group. These naturally generated lucrative work for expert ‘consultants’ who produced dozens of spreadsheets, held long meetings, and rarely if ever left the safety of the PRT. There was no representation in the forward operating bases or at district level, where it really mattered. The civil servants worked six weeks in theatre and were then entitled to two weeks leave. Given this generous work practice, projects inevitably lacked coherence and personal accountability. The civilians also cost a king’s ransom in allowances and security and they were completely dependent on the military for their accommodation, feeding and transport. Unsurprisingly, relations between the soldiers and civilians were strained and sometimes downright hostile.

The Western-staffed HEG and its associated working groups did not work in isolation. These related through weekly meetings and further working groups with Governor Wafa’s Helmand Provincial Council, the Provincial Security Committee, the Helmand Security Shura, the Combined Provincial Command Team, Joint Provincial Coordination Centres, various Provincial Development Committees, and the district governors (where they existed). These Afghan bodies were entirely artificial organisations promoted by the British but unlike their Western counterpart organisations they tended to produce little or no paperwork as the members were almost all illiterate. At one stage the entire cast of elders serving in the Helmand Provincial Council was illiterate including the governor himself. There would be few more eloquent illustrations of the gap between the reality of Helmand, based on tribal loyalties and networks, and the Western-imposed architecture of executive teams, working groups, committees and sub-committees that blossomed within the unreal confines of the Lashkar Gah PRT.

The military contribution to reconstruction and development also remained inadequate. A Development and Influence Team or DIT was formed. The DIT was commanded by a lieutenant colonel and its function, as a staff sergeant who worked in the DIT explained, was to: ‘Come in, speak to the local population, see what they immediately need and what we can do for them. We can provide the locals with basic fresh water, electricity and help them with basic road improvements’.[417] This was ‘military tokenism’ of the sort that had characterised the British deployment in Mazar-e Sharif in 2003-2004. The DIT comprised just ten sappers from 26 Regiment Royal Engineers. This was little different to awarding a contract to a firm of ten plumbers to cover an area the size of southern England.

During this period, the Lashkar Gah PRT was managing a budget of about £8 million,

which was all that Britain had actually committed to reconstruction in Helmand (and not the misleading £500 million headline figure routinely announced by politicians at donor conferences), and it had overseen a small number of building refurbishment programs, which is all that had been achieved one year after British troops deployed to Helmand.

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Counter-narcotics – a purported reason why Britain had volunteered to take responsibility for Helmand by the out-going Blair government – remained a dismal failure. Worldwide, the history of counter-narcotics initiatives had been one of many failures. In 1971, Nixon declared 'a war on drugs' (alarmed by the deterioration of the US Army in Vietnam). Reagan and Thatcher enthusiastically joined the battle in the 1980s, the latter sanctioning the deployment of teams from 22 SAS and the SBS to Colombia to assist the counter-narcotics police. Over the next thirty-five years, the United States spent an estimated $150 billion in counter-narcotics programs and the supply of global illicit drugs rose by a factor of six.[418] A British government had no intention of making this size of financial commitment to combating illicit drugs, nor could it offer any fresh ideas.

According to UNODC, poppy cultivation had increased by 17 per cent in 2007, from 165,000 hectares in 2006 to 193,000 hectares. Opium yields had improved from 37 kilograms per hectare to 42.5 kilograms per hectare. Total potential opium production had swelled from 6,100 tonnes in 2006 to 8,200 tonnes, a 34 per cent increase. Helmand accounted for 53 per cent of the Afghan poppy and it was estimated that Helmand farmers made $528 million from opium in 2007; or about fifty times the sum of money offered as aid by the British government. Four fifths of farming families in Helmand cultivated the opium poppy which was providing about one third of their annual income. Crucially for Taliban revenues, about two thirds of all opium was being processed in Afghanistan. This was where the big profits lay. As many as sixty laboratories were operating in the six districts controlled by Taliban gangs in Helmand.[419] The nexus between farmers, drug traffickers and the Taliban was tight and highly lucrative and it was all happening under the nose of the British.

In 2002, the British government had naively sponsored a compensation scheme for farmers desisting from planting the opium poppy in Helmand. Promoted by Sher Akhundzada, as many as 15,000 hectares may have been turned over to alternative crops (a 49 per cent decline in poppy cultivation at the time). The British team sent to verify the claims, however, was greatly hampered in its efforts by Akhundzada's insistence that they

remain in Lashkar Gah.[420] The deal involved a payment of $350 for each *jerrib* (half an acre) eradicated. Inevitably, Helmand's farmers claimed for far more than they were entitled, ignorant of the fact that opium cultivation was readily monitored and measured through studies of satellite imagery. In total, it appears that a claim three times the size of the lands eradicated was lodged. When the British refused to bow to this transparent Afghan duplicity a delegation was sent to Kabul and President Karzai became involved. The British dug in their heels and the claim for a further $21 million was never accepted. Like his uncle who had once ordered poppy eradication on the back of promises made by the US government, now the younger Sher Akhundzada found himself mollifying tribesmen who felt let down by a British government, notwithstanding that the farmers had provoked the dispute through blatant dishonesty. Akhundzada was not an entirely innocent party in these shenanigans as it appears he deliberately pushed eradication into the fields of rivals, provoking demonstrations in Lashkar Gah.[421] This episode soured relations irreparably and poppy cultivation expanded across the Green Zone. In provinces like Nangarhar, ill-conceived British forays into counter-narcotics led to deaths and unrest. These failures, it appears, were never honestly reassessed. When the task force arrived in Helmand in 2006, Britain still led ISAF's 'Counter-Narcotics Pillar', to use the awful management-speak, but in no meaningful or effective way.

A stated goal of the Afghan Compact had been to reduce and then eliminate completely opium production in the country. Leaving aside the questionable feasibility of such an ambitious project, it was difficult to envisage how this might have been achieved without at least some forced eradication. A self-imposed restraint by farmers seemed doomed to failure. If ISAF did not tackle the poppy cultivation would it not be caught in a perpetual cycle of chasing a product with a limitless supply of its basic raw material?

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The central argument against eradication was that it alienated the farmers and created recruits for the insurgency. The paltry Government Led Eradication (GLE) schemes that were implemented in Helmand certainly provoked local hostility but the scale of the eradications, and the fact that farmers could simply re-plant and start again, or buy-off the eradication teams with bribes, never really tested the proposition that a significant eradication program would provoke a general insurrection. When the Taliban famously issued their edict forbidding the opium poppy in 2000, cultivation collapsed overnight (but not opium production). There was no insurrection, proof, so it was argued by the proponents of eradication, that the poppy-growing farmers were exaggerating their

poverty. Research conducted in the poppy-growing provinces however seemed to disprove this view, which for the British was the crux of the matter.[422] A poll taken in Helmand Province seemed to show that as many as a quarter of farmers who had suffered eradication had been forced to sell a child (invariably a daughter) to pay their consequent debt to the narco-traffickers who had loaned them money during the previous planting season. About half had had to flee the province and over two thirds had reported that their support for the Taliban had increased. It was perfectly natural that Helmand farmers viewed any attempt to interfere with the poppy cultivation as potentially calamitous and British twitchiness over eradication appears to have been fully justified.

Avoidance of poppy eradication did not address the problem of the culture of dependency in a country where one in seven Afghans was believed to be dependent on the opium trade and where the gross profits from this trade exceeded the country's GDP by a factor of 2-3 (by UNODC estimates). In Helmand the proportion of families involved in poppy cultivation was perhaps as many as one in four. Many of the cultivators' debts to the traffickers were denominated in opium prices. This was the crucial factor. If poppy cultivation fell (as it did dramatically in 2000-01), opium prices increased tenfold but so did the debts owed by farmers. The arithmetic of this dependency was pernicious. A farmer essentially contracted a future, known as the *salaam,* with the trafficker, for a certain quantity of opium. A 10 kilogram bag of opium was a standard measure. If a kilo of opium was selling at $50 per kilo the trafficker would normally advance the farmer half the amount of the future trade or $250. This cash would tide the farmer over the winter months. At harvest, and on delivery of the 10 kilograms of opium, the framer would receive the balance, or a further $250. Any additional opium would represent profit, and a failure to meet the agreed contract would represent debt. Opium price inflation, coupled with a failure to deliver the opium product to the trafficker, spelled disaster for a farmer. If opium prices increased tenfold, the farmer's debt on, say, a $500 loan was now $5,000. The need to grow the opium poppy in the following planting season, to pay off *salaam* debts, created a self-reinforcing chain of dependency between farmer and trafficker. This matrix of debt obligations extended beyond farmers and traffickers. In a province like Helmand, without any recognisable modern banking system, an entire superstructure of commercial debt obligations was imperilled by any threat to the opium trade. Everybody was affected, from a bazaar trader in Musa Qaleh to a motorcycle mechanic in Gereshk. Helmand's economy was essentially a narco-economy and the opium bag was, to coin a phrase, Helmand's equivalent of an ATM.

Into this mix arrived the Taliban who themselves became hooked to the opium trade as a source of revenue. This alliance of narco-trafficker and insurgent predated the Taliban and had origins in the mujahidin resistance to the Soviet invasion. As in so many other ways, everyone was paying a price for Russia's misconceived interference in Afghan affairs in the 1980s. By the time the Taliban arrived on the scene, the markets, smuggling routes, laboratories and commercial relationships were all well established. The first boom years coincided with the collapse of civil order following the withdrawal of the Soviet Army and this was followed by a second boom at the beginning of the 21st century. The Taliban movement in turn fuelled the trade by promoting lawlessness, the 'ungoverned space' that ISAF would try to squeeze. A ten per cent *ushr* tax claimed by the Taliban on the opium produce was little more than a perverse exploitation of an ancient Islamic tax on agricultural and other products used to pay for the upkeep of mosques, schools and other social projects. More money was made however through protection, transhipment and refinement of the drug. Although the Taliban exploited and taxed the trade, they did not depend on it. Both before and after September 11, opium remained a modest if useful revenue stream. The Taliban movement was financially sustained by foreign contributors: Saudis, Kuwaitis, Qataris, as well as by near neighbours like Pakistan and Iran. American efforts to turn off these taps would always founder against the opacity of Islamic financial systems and regional political agendas.

It would have been a mistake to view the opium trade as a Taliban problem, although it was true to say that the movement had already become a narco-insurgency by 2006. The challenge facing the British was that the opium and heroin trades were transnational and involved a huge number of players. The eighteen year old soldier deployed to Helmand was not just taking on some petty dealer with a bag of opium paste. He was indirectly challenging a wide range of characters across the region: corrupt Afghan government officials (including, allegedly, the president's brother); corrupt Afghan and Pakistani police; Iranian, Afghan and Pakistani smuggling gangs and traffickers (known as the 'Quetta circle'); trucking mafias; Pakistani and Arab shipping mafias; the Pakistani secret services and armed forces; the Iranian Al Qods force; Uzbek narco-gangs (perhaps controlling 70 per cent of the heroin trade in central Asia); Arab drug cartels mostly based in Dubai; Iranian; Chinese and Pakistani arms suppliers abetted by Russian arms dealers; and Turkish criminal gangs – to name just the main players. Helmand was at the centre of this spider's web of multi-billion dollar criminality. In this respect and without hindsight, the naivety which the British government demonstrated when it sent a single reinforced battalion to Helmand in the spring of 2006 was breath-taking.

Regardless of the failures in reconstruction and in tackling the illicit drug trade, the war had to go on. In the second half of June, the Royal Anglians mounted Operation Ghartse Ghar (‘Mountain Stag’), a second sweep of the Green Zone north of Sangin. A Taliban commander called Tor Jan had made a mockery of the earlier Operation Lastay Kulang by re-imposing Taliban control in the area north of Sangin, a situation which the British felt obliged to reverse. Two days before the operation started an emotional but terse Tony Blair handed over the premiership of the country to his chancellor and rival Gordon Brown, in a packed House of Commons. The leader of the opposition, David Cameron, sportingly led the applause of the departing Labour leader. The Prime Minister who led Britain into Helmand Province, and who even by the most optimistic projection of three years would never have overseen the conclusion of the mission, left after just one year.

Tony Blair had been a war Prime Minister. He had believed in using the armed forces as a force for moral good. This dispensation of good from the barrel of a gun had back-fired in Iraq, tarnishing the last years of his ten year premiership. Afghanistan had also back-fired but now the problem was being handed over to a Prime Minister who was much less interested in foreign adventures and who would only ‘get the war’ when it threatened his office. Gordon Brown’s disinterest in military affairs did not disqualify him from being a keen judge of military campaigns. One of the paradoxes of his premiership was that he instinctively saw through the confident assessments of his military commanders. He never believed the war could be won with one more push. Instead, he harboured the visceral distrust of politicians tired of being told by the generals that the war will be over by Christmas. Trapped by an electorate that laid all the blame for the mismanaged war at the government’s door – now his front door – he was forced to act against his instincts and bow to the demands of the war machine. Only in the last six months of his government, facing electoral meltdown, did he bang his ‘clunking fist’, but by then it was too late.

For the Royal Anglians in Sangin, the national change in leadership was as remote as it was irrelevant. The battlegroup would be re-visiting an area it had ostensibly cleared of insurgents just three weeks previously. The objective would be the village of Jusyalay, a small Barakzai settlement just five kilometres north of the town of Sangin. As with the previous two sweeps, Danish and Estonian troops, as well as US special force teams took part in the operation. The village was in machine gun range of FOB Inkerman – the newly-built forward operating base on the edge of the Green Zone - and it was suspected that many of the local men were implicated in attacks that had been launched against this base ever since it had been built. During Operation Lastay Kulang surprise had been lost by the use of vehicles that created both noise and clouds of dust that were visible for

miles. To achieve surprise–and to actually catch the gunmen rather than encourage them to disperse – it was decided to approach Jusyalay on foot and at night. To distract enemy sentries, Suffolk Company would advance first through the Green Zone, using the still open FOB Fox as a launching point. This involved some risk as the RAF was refusing to fly casevac helicopters into the Green Zone after the downing of the American Chinook. Some of the battlegroup staff argued that the operation was altogether too risky but it went ahead anyway. To reach their lines of departure, Norfolk Company would undertake a sixteen kilometre detour route march in the desert with some soldiers carrying as much as eighty pounds of equipment.

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The ruse seemed to pay off. When Suffolk Company began their advance from FOB Fox they came under a hail of small arms and RPG fire. The gun battle raged all day with the British laying on increasingly heavy demonstrations of firepower to winkle the gunmen from their positions. Individual sections fought their way across ditches killing several isolated groups of fighters along the way. Some appeared to be local villagers who had reacted to the gun fire by joining in the general mêlée. When 6 Platoon approached the bodies of two fighters they had killed they discovered that one was a middle-aged man and the second a sixteen year old boy, a father and his son perhaps.[423] Suffolk Company's determined advance nonetheless had a snowball effect. Gangs of fighters withdrew first to a settlement called Kshatah Malazi, and subsequently to a larger village called Katowzay. By nightfall the company had reached the river and was ordered to bed down in preparation for a second probing attack the following morning. Norfolk Company, which had been expecting more trouble in Jusyalay, overcame initial resistance swiftly and was now in a position to advance north and make the link-up with the sister company.

The following morning Norfolk Company resumed its advance and met serious resistance in the vicinity of Katowzay. The gun battle raged for six hours and despite a battering from Apache and strike aircraft the villagers did not yield. The fighting only eventually seemed to stop when a single B1-B bomber flew low over the village shaking the ground with the roar of its engines. This was only a temporary respite as after a lunch break firing erupted again. A radio intercept revealed that Tor Jan, the insurgent leader, was alive and well and still in command of around eighty fighters.[424] By now Suffolk Company had suffered three casualties requiring gruelling stretcher carries as the RAF was still refusing to authorise casualty extractions in the Green Zone (this unrealistic policy was abandoned by the end of the summer). Unable to make further progress the

company once again bedded down for the night in preparation for a dawn attack on the village. This assault proved an anti-climax. The fighters appeared to have had enough. After over-coming three sentries the soldiers discovered that the village was deserted. The lull, however, proved deceptive. A well-led group of insurgents counter-attacked Suffolk Company and with a single, close range RPG shot, managed to wound five soldiers. Extraordinary luck saved the soldiers on this occasion. Private Thompson described what happened:

'We were blown up in a ditch…and an RPG shot out of a bush, hitting me in the chest. My Osprey body armour saved my life so I was lucky. There was a big dent but I wasn't allowed to keep it as a souvenir. My leg snapped in half. I was in agony but the blokes helped me out of the trench and then I was shot in the face. Back at Bastion, doctors removed the bullet… I won't be able to go back on the frontline but I don't really mind. I reckon you've got three lives and I used up two of mine.'[425]

His life was almost certainly saved by the fact that the warhead had not armed and only glanced against his body armour. He was not the only soldier to enjoy good fortune that morning. Private Perry who was standing next to him received 157 separate shrapnel wounds over his body and survived the experience.[426] Having suffered eight casualties in three days (the company had actually started the operation with two under-strength platoons), it was clear that the Suffolks had run out of soldiers. A platoon of Grenadier Guards was flown in to reinforce the exhausted company. The operation would continue for a further five days but the main fighting was now over.

To support the infantrymen, Hill Troop based at FOB Robinson had laid down suppressive fire over the course of the operation with its 105mm Light Guns. Even at these extreme ranges and firing on 'super charge' the gunners were pleasantly surprised by the accuracy of their fire in the thin, dry air. During Ghartse Gar, an ANA company from 3/205 Brigade, mentored by Grenadier Guardsmen, again ran into difficulties and had to be rescued by combined fire from Apache helicopters and an American F-16 that dropped a 2,000 pound bomb killing eight insurgents outright. Once again, a mobile operation had resulted in no British fatalities, despite the close nature of the fighting. The British exaggeratedly claimed they killed at least 100 insurgents.

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Following Operation Ghartse Gar there was a decline in attacks in the local area but this was only a temporary respite. The British could not hold Jusyalay and beyond some

token ditch digging they had nothing to offer in terms of reconstruction. Within a month the status quo ante had been restored and FOB Inkerman was once again a base surrounded by a hostile population. Faced with this resurgent opposition the brigade would run Operation Leg Tufaan ('Small Storm') from 16 June to 10 July in what was now a fourth attempt since May to clear the troublesome Sangin and Upper Gereshk Valleys. Over the course of the operation a base was built on the edge of the Green Zone north-east of Gereshk (FOB Sandford, named after Lance Corporal Paul 'Sandy' Sandford). In a break from the usual state of affairs, 2 Mercians who led the mission were highly impressed with their Afghan counterparts, reporting that the operations could not have been conducted without the ANA. FOB Inkerman continued to act like a magnet attracting local attacks which reached a climax at the beginning of August.

Whenever the soldiers patrolled out of their bases they would be met by volleys of rifle fire and hostile villagers. These greatly misnamed 'ground domination patrols' (GDAs) only served to create front lines that would eventually encroach on the bases themselves. Casualties were also inevitably incurred. When Essex Company patrolled to the village of Regay in mid-August, Private Tony Rawson was killed, shot through the head.[427] The villagers had no hope of over-running a base like Inkerman but a lucky rocket strike against one of the sangars wounded four soldiers and killed the base commander, Captain David Hicks, a popular officer who had stood in for the company commander while the latter was on leave.

The penultimate sweep operation was called Chakush ('Hammer') and it ran from 16 July to 9 August in stiflingly hot weather. The aim of the operation was to clear insurgents from the villages of Heyderabad and Mirmandab and to establish a second patrol base in the area (subsequently called FOB Arnhem, an appropriate name as it proved a FOB too far and would eventually be abandoned). The two villages that straddled the already established FOB Gibraltar were situated on the east bank of the Helmand River, about twenty kilometres north of Gereshk. Many of the local men were 'ten dollar Talibs' who regularly took pot shots at army patrols operating from the base. The operation was initiated on 24 July, in the early hours of the morning, with a heliborne assault led by the Grenadier Guards, mentoring Afghan soldiers from the 2nd Kandak of 3/205 Brigade. In common with previous operations, a massive demonstration of force followed. In all, about 2,000 troops took part including the Light Dragoons; 26 Engineer Regiment who built a bridge over the Nahr-e Saraj canal; 19 Regiment Royal Artillery who provided the fire support; and American, Danish and Estonian troops. As before, the enemy melted

away. On 9 August, after the completion of FOB Arnhem, the operation was declared closed.

Naturally, this was not the end of the matter. From 30 August to 2 September the brigade was again forced to mount another operation (Operation Palk Ghar) to relieve pressure on the district centre in Sangin and FOB Inkerman. At the conclusion of this final sally into the Green Zone the battlegroup reckoned that it had killed forty insurgents. Over the course of seven battlegroup operations the Royal Anglians had succeeded in wearing down the tribal resistance but the effects were always temporary and quickly reversed. PowerPoint slides showing how the number of incidents had declined following an operation were measured in one or two weeks. Within a month, attacks had returned to former levels of intensity or got worse. This second set of statistics was not so widely advertised.

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In London a perception of mounting success was created by this wave of operations. In mid-July, the House of Commons Defence Committee published a report that broadly presented an optimistic view of the British campaign. The Defence Secretary Des Browne welcomed the report, gratified by its recognition that ‘we are performing well against a challenging background’. The polite arena of parliamentary committees was unlikely to provide a damning criticism of the war effort to date, but the committee members could not fail to notice that British reconstruction in Helmand was decidedly thin and that the unending problem of helicopter availability had still not been resolved.

Although 12 Mechanised Brigade’s main effort through the spring and summer was to establish government control in the Gereshk - Musa Qaleh - Kajaki triangle, in northern Helmand, the task force still had responsibility for one outpost in southern Helmand, the company base FOB Delhi, established by the marines in Darvishan. Ever since the marines had occupied the derelict compound at the abandoned agricultural college, Darvishan had become a thorn in the side of the British. Unable to commit more than a hundred men to the defence of this town the task force found itself trapped in an irresolvable siege situation. It was a repetition of the ‘platoon house’ sieges of the previous summer, and with no end in sight. The fighting had caused a collapse of economic activity in the town which had emptied of all civilians, and the Taliban frontline was just a few hundred metres away. During the marines’ stay at Darvishan they had discovered that the only way to outflank the insurgents was to attack from the west, across the Helmand River. Although this was a major water feature it was also fordable in places. To the east

of the town, an American-built canal blocked all movement. The bridge that had existed over the canal had been destroyed and a Russian armoured car rested at the bottom of the canal. In late spring, the decision was taken to open up this eastern flank by building a 30 metre medium girder bridge, or MGB, over the canal. Although the erection of an MGB was a routine engineering task, the Royal Engineers had not built a bridge in combat conditions for many years.

Operation Bataka was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Angus Watson, the commanding officer of the Light Dragoons battlegroup, and involved a company from the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters, and Number Three Company from the Grenadier Guards. An ANA company also supported the operation. The bridge, later christened Balaklava Bridge after a Grenadier battle honour, was erected in a matter of hours by forty sappers from 26 Engineer Regiment on 21 June, in the early hours of the morning. Working in full body armour and in darkness significantly increased the workload but the bridge was completed by dawn. To deter insurgent attacks, Number Three Company raided east beyond the bridge and a permanent checkpoint was built at the site. Operation Bataka was a success, but one that could not be exploited. The British company in Darvishan would not be strengthened and it was not until the following summer, when US marines deployed to Garmsir, that the Taliban were finally pushed away from the area and the town re-opened. Lieutenant Colonel Watson's assertion that the bridge 'will provide a bigger space into which civilians can move back and continue the expansion of government and security in this area' proved a premature hope by about twelve months. [428]

In August, Suffolk Company left behind the Green Zone and relieved Essex Company at Kajaki. The level of hostility towards the British presence at the dam remained unabated. In the first month, just one Royal Anglian patrol did not come under enemy fire on leaving the safety of FOB Zeebrugge.[429] This hostility was matched by the continued inaccuracy of the enemy fire. The chances of being hit were very remote despite the expenditure of thousands of rounds of ammunition. Essex Company had taken casualties but these had all been self-inflicted. A patrol early in the tour had stumbled on an IED that resulted in a soldier losing his foot. Later during the deployment it was decided to raid the nearby village of Mazdurak. These raids achieved little more than stir up an already confrontational situation. During this first raid Essex Company came close to having a soldier captured by villagers after a Private Craig Gordon was hit three times by close range fire. He was rescued even as he was bleeding to death in a desperate action by one

of the section commanders. A second soldier – a guardsman – was subsequently shot and blinded in one eye and this incident required mounting a second rescue. Three more soldiers would be seriously wounded before the company ran out of bullets and momentum and the operation abandoned.

The lesson from these experiences, perversely, was to keep having a go at the villagers despite the risk of incurring casualties. Suffolk Company did eventually suffer three fatalities when three privates - Aaron McClure, Graham Foster, and John Thrumble - were killed accidentally on 23 August in an air strike. McClure and Foster were teenagers. Before they died they had already taken part in over forty gun battles. Thrumble, barely out of his teens, had already served a tour in Iraq. The bomb that killed them landed in the middle of a compound decimating the section occupying the building. A Corporal Parker, who had been on the roof of the building, was literally reduced to his boxer shorts and boots, all his equipment and clothing ripped off his body. A second severely wounded soldier, Private Lee, helped him off the roof. In the confusion and still under fire, Private Foster's body was left behind, unnoticed under the rubble, and a patrol would have to be despatched later that evening to recover the corpse. Foster's lifeless body was finally found at 2am. The forward air controller who called in the two USN F-15s had accidentally given the wrong grid to the American pilots. This incident seemed to sum up the futility of the confrontation at Kajaki Dam that had long descended into a ritual play between two performers trading lead insults on a daily basis. In the gaps between these exchanges of gunfire the Afghan employees at the dam and at the security posts scurried to their work places like commuters intent on avoiding an imminent rain storm. The timings of these attacks became routine to the extent that Major Borgnis, the Suffolk Company commander, recalled predicting to a visitor when the next attack would begin. On this particular occasion it was at twenty past five in the morning (although it actually started eight minutes early, as if to thwart the accuracy of his prediction). What followed was a typical dawn gun fight at Kajaki. The soldiers fired off 6,000 rounds, probably failing to hit anyone or anything. The mortar detachment at the base lobbed 237 mortar bombs. And a circling pair of American fighters dropped three 500 pound bombs on likely enemy fire positions.[430] The whole show lasted about an hour and a half and it is not inconceivable that no one was actually killed or even wounded by the exchange of fire.

If this was already a stalemated war, it was also a technological war of measure and counter-measure. Over the course of the summer, 12 Mechanised Brigade began to benefit from the arrival of new equipment denied to the paratroopers or marines. The reliable,

thick-skinned and tracked Warrior armoured personnel carrier migrated from Basra to Bastion. It looked very different to the virgin vehicle that was unloaded off container ships in 2003 in Kuwait. Extra passive armour plates had inflated its waist; it was covered in a bird cage of RPG screens; it had sprouted antennae and electronic counter measures; and its occupants had learned to keep their heads down. The vehicle at first proved tough in Afghanistan – one unit would report eleven IED strikes against their Warriors and no fatalities.[431] Later, larger-sized IEDs would make this a hazardous vehicle, particularly for the drivers. A company's-worth of these vehicles would be deployed on Operation Herrick which the Taliban would wrongly dub 'tanks'.

A tracked vehicle traditionally offered the advantage of mobility over boggy ground. This inspired the invention of the tank in the First World War. In Helmand's Green Zone it came as a disappointment to discover that the ground was so rutted with ditches and flooded fields that even tracked vehicles bogged down. Rather than providing an edge over insurgents, tracked vehicles were proving a potential liability. A tracked vehicle that bogged down required a bigger tracked vehicle to recover it. This was a major operation lasting hours and not uncommonly under fire from gleeful villagers. An entire day could be frustrated by the simple act of a single vehicle getting stuck in a ditch. It seemed to mock the very notion of out-manoeuvring the Taliban who had actually become quite good at out-manoeuvring the British using 'light cavalry' mounted on Helmand's ubiquitous Honda 125cc motorcycles (several years later, the al-Qaeda magazine *Azan* would publish a paean to this motorcycle – Honda, naturally, declined to comment). Tracked vehicles were also very expensive to maintain and required constant attention.

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What the British Army desperately needed was a wheeled vehicle: a muscular troop carrier with a tough bottom and lots of firepower. Only American industry could be counted on producing such a beast. It was called the Cougar and it rolled off the production lines of Force Protection Incorporated in Ladson, South Carolina. The British renamed it Mastiff, which seemed a more appropriate name, but it was the same vehicle. The story of this vehicle was one of quintessential Yankee can-do and it highlighted the comparative weakness of British industry. Force Protection had only been incorporated in 1997. By the time Cougar was being mass-produced, the company had expanded twenty-fold and was occupying a 260 acre campus near Charleston Air Base. The original Cougar had now been joined by a stable of related vehicles and the order books kept filling. This was a success story which British military vehicle manufacturers could no longer imagine

still less realize.[432]

The Mastiff was undoubtedly a big beast. At 28 tonnes when fully laden, this vehicle collapsed most bridges in Helmand. Over seven metres long, it had a turning circle of twenty metres which made it virtually impossible to negotiate the vehicle in narrow alleys. But these disadvantages were offset by its single undeniable advantage – survivability. In this respect, Mastiff proved the outstanding success story of the war. The key to its virtual impregnability to roadside bombs lay in its design. The vehicle stood high above the ground with wheel arches that deflected rather than contained blast. The engine block was mounted well forward of the crew compartment. In the event of a high explosive detonation it sheared from the main hull of the vehicle. The steel hull was strengthened with additional armours and spall liners. All this protection meant that it was not until almost the end of the war that the British finally suffered fatalities in a Mastiff (a massive 200 kilogram bomb on Route 601 ripped open the back of the vehicle killing three soldiers – no vehicle would have survived such a blast). This record was a quite unique achievement in military engineering design. The British Army had never fielded a combat vehicle in its entire history in which it had suffered precisely no combat deaths. A single Mastiff would eventually set what appeared to be a record, surviving five separate IED attacks. The troops, understandably, loved it. The debt to American defence industry is huge.

Protection against roadside bombs was becoming paramount, but having the capability to strike this elusive enemy was equally important. To frontline commanders it was evident that the British Army also needed a precise mallet. Again, British defence industry could not supply such a weapon but American industry could. The Lockheed Martin Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System or GMLRS was first fielded by 35 Battery (the Welsh Gunners) in the summer of 2007. It arrived with a great deal of expectation and excitement. GMLRS was an upgrade of an existing system sold to the British Army in the 1980s. GMLRS fired a single XM31 unitary rocket carrying a 200 pound warhead out to seventy kilometres. It never failed and its accuracy was stunning.[433] This weapon was dubbed ‘the silent killer’ because, unlike aircraft that signalled their presence with engine noise, it fell virtually noiselessly giving no warning to its intended victims. B Troop, 39 Regiment Royal Artillery recalled the first rocket launch from FOB Robinson:

‘We arrived into FOB Rob and started settling into our new campsite location. Once the ammunition arrived two days later we could report ready and wait for the missions to come in. Three weeks later we were still waiting. Then one fine morning Sgt Berry broke

his duck, and he did so in some style. He fired two, 3 rocket closed sheaf missions in support of operations.'[434]

A video of one of the first launches seemed to show the rocket landing to the right of the target compound (this did not stop the editor from pasting a 'Target Destroyed' caption to accompany the historic footage).

GMLRS required mensuration software for its operation. This determined with the necessary geodetic accuracy where on the earth's surface the target was. This was not a straightforward question to answer, but a crucial one as the unerring accuracy of the rocket meant that it would fly to within less than five metres of the designated aiming point, whether that aiming point was accurately described or not. Given the rocket's extremely low Target Location Error (TLE) it was imperative to 'tell' the rocket where to fly with absolute precision. The mensuration software was based on secret data, developed by the US National Imagery and Mapping Agency (NIMA), and recorded in a Digital Point Positioning Data Base, or DPPDB. This was supplied to the British in a portable system called PSS-SOF (pronounced 'piss off'), which stood for Precision Strike Suite–Special Operations Forces. PSS-SOF was subsequently supplemented by a base system called SOCET GXP (SOftCopy Exploitation Toolkit). As in other examples of military technology, the British, along with two other countries (Canada, Australia) were fortunate to be recipients of this American largesse. By March 2009, the British Army's four launchers had fired off 449 rockets, the most intensive firing rate of any GMLRS battery in Afghanistan.[435]

Striking precisely was only one half of the so-called targeting cycle. Finding the enemy was the other. 12 Mechanised Brigade had already deployed with a hand-thrown American mini-UAV, the Desert Hawk. This had a range of about ten kilometres and a limited endurance of about one hour. In the late summer, 57 (Bhurtpore) Battery received the first of the newly-leased Israeli Hermes 450 UAVs. These medium altitude UAVs had a range of 150 kilometres and an endurance of fourteen hours. Initially only two aircraft were leased, and there were delays in setting up the operation, but once established the Hermes 450 battery provided a reliable set of airborne eyes for the British task force. Capable of night and day tasking and with the ability to pinpoint targets with accurate geo-coordinates, Hermes 450 was the natural bedfellow of GMLRS.

The last significant piece of new equipment fielded by the brigade was the Javelin anti-tank missile (the previous brigade had been similarly equipped). Also produced by Lockheed Martin, Javelin was the first ever 'fire-and-forget' missile bought by the British

Army. This cutting edge technology was originally developed to counter the massed tanks of the Warsaw Pact. Unlike conventional anti-tank missiles that used wire-guidance from launcher to target, the Javelin only required the operator to ‘gate’ the target within the sight picture and to press the fire button when the missile launcher achieved lock-on. Once launched, the missile flew in an upwards trajectory before crashing down onto the target. There were no tanks in Helmand but the missile served equally well as a man-killer, albeit an extremely expensive one. Each missile cost over £70,000. To the soldiers, firing a Javelin was ‘throwing a Porsche’ at the Taliban. Competitions to become the first ‘Javelin millionaire’ became the game, although it is doubtful that any one individual managed to fire off a million pounds’ worth of missiles. The Javelin had a range of over two kilometres which gave the British an important advantage in stand-off engagements. The penetration enjoyed by the missile against the thick adobe walls of Helmand’s compounds was another matter. Over the course of war, scores of Javelin were fired at rock-hard compound walls to no effect.

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Perhaps of the biggest challenge facing the brigade, as it mounted operations across the Green Zone, was its communication systems. By the end of the 1990s the Army’s ageing Clansman radio system needed urgent replacement. For a combination of reasons, the provision of a modern, secure, digital radio network for the British Army turned into a procurement horror story. Ten years elapsed and hundreds of millions of pounds were spent on a possible candidate system that was subsequently cancelled. After delaying for a decade the MOD then jumped precipitously and signed an ambitious £2.4 billion deal to procure the Bowman radio system. A ‘big bang’ approach would see the army converted to the new radio system in a rolling program whose scale drew sceptical comments from industry commentators. The sceptics, it turned out, were right. Bowman, soldiers joked, stood for ‘Better off with Map and Nokia’. Complaints were received that the radios were heavy and the batteries had insufficient life. Patrols discovered that they had to take risks and keep radios switched off unless they ran into trouble, to save battery life. The radios also initially interfered with the ECM, a phenomenon known as ‘communications fratricide’. The range of the radios in the Green Zone proved disappointing – on occasions VHF sets could only communicate over hundreds of metres. The HF sets, that should theoretically have afforded long range communications, were similarly disappointing. Crucially, Bowman failed to provide ‘Situational Awareness’, or the plotting of the locations of vehicles or personnel on digital map views. This was not novel technology: the average taxi firm in Britain avails itself of GPS tracking. As one officer put it, the

communications of the brigade were ‘simply unbelievable’ and bore ‘more resemblance with military preparations in 1914 than 2007’. Urgent upgrades would be implemented to rectify the problems with the Bowman radio system, but much like the Land Rover Snatch story, not before confidence had been lost.

The difficulty of using the Bowman radio system in Helmand provoked a rash of emergency procurements. Commercial TACSAT became the default radio. To provide ‘Situational Awareness’ a second commercial tracking system (with servers based in Texas) was rushed into service. The Iridium telephone became popular as a back-up. Secret information could not be exchanged. Nor could headquarters exchange images or video. Any large operation required a laborious transfer of personnel by helicopter for face-to-face discussions because of the failures of a radio system whose chief selling point had been that it provided secure, digital communications.

Political sensitivity over the problems of the Bowman radio system was acute (especially after a failure in communications involving the Clansman radio in Iraq in which six Military Police were killed, unable to raise help). Commanding officers returning from theatre who tried to voice their concerns were asked to restrain their language. In the end, Task Force Helmand muddled on with an erratic and hybrid radio network. In a further twist to the army’s problems, two years later, a future strategic communications system known as Cormorant was also ditched (after a further expenditure of hundreds of millions of pounds). In its place, a reliable Israeli commercial system was bought instead.

Re-supplying this enlarged force had become a significant logistic operation. The brigade had deployed with 10,000 tons of equipment all of which had had to be flown to Helmand then distributed to the various forward operating bases and patrol bases. In a typical week the brigade was consuming about 250 tonnes of ammunition (or twenty five Hercules loads) – this figure alone should have alerted the distracted Labour government that it had become embroiled in a serious war. The number of ration packs delivered exceeded 88,000 man days. A further fifty-six tons of fresh food were being delivered each month and about eighteen tons of mail.[436] This operation struggled to meet the demands of the task force, lacking both modern asset tracking systems and manpower. A study by the National Audit Office in 2007 discovered that the average length of time a unit had to wait for priority one, two and three items was two weeks, three weeks and thirteen weeks respectively. This implied that a priority three item ordered in the second half of the tour was likely to arrive in Helmand after the unit had returned to Britain.

Even as the brigade unrolled its operations it was learning surprising lessons, or

perhaps re-visiting old lessons. Despite the advantage of possessing a range of modern surveillance technologies, the insurgents remained a difficult enemy to spot and target. Their cunning was the same guile recorded by General Skeen writing on frontier wars in 1932:

'Their power of moving concealed is outstanding, not only in moving from cover to cover, but in slipping from light to shadow, and background to background. It has to be seen to be believed.'[437]

'Human-wolves' with red eyes from watching their victims were required to spot the elusive Pathan, the general advised, adding 'one can't help admiring these folk, and if we don't take lessons from their doings, we deserve all we get'. This was the open question- were the British learning or were they getting all they deserved?

Afghans were encountered who believed the British were Russian troops. This was a truly Biblical land, utterly cut-off from the realities of the outside world. The British were only just beginning to understand how little they understood. The lack of willingness on the part of Afghans to take a leading role in the problems of their country also came as a profound and disappointing shock. The expansion of the British mission in Afghanistan had been predicated on a fantastic assumption that an Afghan Army could be trained in two or three years. Now planners were beginning to talk in terms of tens of years. The difficulty and complexity of working in a multi-lingual coalition was also beginning to sink in. There was no thin red British line in Helmand. It was a rainbow coalition, with no pot of gold at the end. As well as the presence of American troops, Helmand was shared with Danes, Czechs and Estonians. The largest contingent, a reinforced Danish battalion, occupied the midriff around the commercial town of Gereshk on the banks of the River Helmand. A Jordanian special force company would later join the expanding force, one of the rare deployments of a Muslim contingent to assist Afghan co-religionists.

The biggest visible change was the expansion of the British 'footprints'. 3 Commando Brigade had avoided fixing itself in bases and had sought to fight a mobile counter-insurgency war. 12 Mechanised Brigade reversed this approach. By the time the brigade handed over in the autumn, British forces had built thirty-one new FOBs and patrol bases (although not all were manned by British soldiers). This was a clear signal of future intent and began the process that would see literally hundreds of security locations, from checkpoints to major bases, constructed in Helmand. 12 Mechanised Brigade was the last not to be fixed. After 2007 the British task force would always be a dispersed, fixed and increasingly defensive force.

At Sangin, a series of patrol bases and vehicle check points was built extending north-west and south from the town on Route 611. These were roughly spaced at one kilometre intervals, like a bead of Roman forts, and named after regimental battle honours (or were baptised with the name of a fallen comrade). Thus anyone leaving Sangin District Centre and heading north to Kajaki would have to first pass through Norfolk vehicle check point, then drive under the guns of Blenheim, Downes and Inkerman patrol bases (the latter subsequently expanded and converted into a full Forward Operating Base). If you drove south you had to negotiate Suffolk vehicle check point and Waterloo patrol base. It was intended that the patrol bases and checkpoints would control the main arterial route in and out of Sangin, as well as provide a permanent manned presence overlooking the hostile Green Zone. But this was to invite British soldiers to play the part of Roman legionnaires staring out at the barbarians beyond the rampart walls – a provocation the barbarians could not resist – and it made Sangin no safer.

In the south the British company based at Darvishan continued to find itself in a beleaguered position. The soldiers still occupied the deserted agricultural college at FOB Delhi, and they continued to man the observation posts at JTAC hill, as well as the Eastern Checkpoint opposite Balaklava Bridge. The front line had not moved one foot in twelve months. The Taliban occupied trench positions just a few hundred metres from the east-west road that ran through the middle of the town. Daily, they engaged the British. A measure of the intensity of the de facto siege was the number of fire missions called to support FOB Delhi. Kiang Troop from 127 Gun Battery, based at the nearby FOB Dwyer, fired their guns on all but one day of their three month tour in the south. This troop, in fact, fired more shells than any other troop in Helmand, despite the fact that all the major British operations took place 100 kilometres to the north.[438] A colossal amount of ammunition was being expended just to maintain the status quo.

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On 19 September, the brigade mounted its last major operation - Operation Palk Wahel (‘Sledgehammer’). It seemed an apt name as this is what the soldiers had been swinging all summer. The aim was to clear the village of Zumbelay (scene of the gunfight that provoked the *Sunday Times* newspaper story in the previous summer). Following the clearance, a forward operating base would be built about four kilometres north of the village near a smaller settlement called Khan Nikah Radirah, in the middle of the Green Zone. The advantage of this location was that it stood on a slight hillock. FOB Keenan, as the base became known, would consequently enjoy commanding views of the surrounding

area. For the local tribesmen at Zumbelay, who had once fought a pitched battle against a company of paratroopers, the arrival of about 2,500 soldiers on the edge of their village must have been a considerable surprise. In addition to the Grenadier Guards battlegroup that had taken part in the previous operation in the Gereshk Valley (Operation Chakush), the British task force was augmented by the newly arrived 1 Royal Gurkha Rifles and the Right Flank Company of the Scots Guards mounted in Warrior armoured personnel carriers. Brigadier Lorimer had originally requested the deployment of a company of Warriors to Helmand but had been turned down. Now the Warriors were finally being deployed, but with the successor formation, 52 (Lowland) Brigade. As if in vindication, Brigadier Lorimer bagged one of the Warriors to act as his Tactical HQ for part of the operation. The penny-pinchers at Whitehall had been beaten, if late in the day. Operation Palk Wahel was concluded on 1 October without British fatalities. On returning from the operation, however, a convoy carrying Gurkha soldiers ran over a road side bomb. Captain Alexis Roberts, a popular officer who had been Prince William's platoon officer at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst was killed instantly. He left behind a widow and two young girls and his death predictably made headline news in Britain.

Captain Roberts was the first soldier to die from the successor brigade. For the departing brigade, September had also been an unlucky month, in particular for the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters. In June three soldiers from the regiment had been killed in separate incidents. With the handover imminent, it appeared the regiment would get off lightly. Then, on 5 September, two privates were killed in Garmsir. The youngest, Ben Ford, was a teenager. Three days later, Corporal Craig Brelsford and a South African, Private Johan Botha, were killed in an ambush. During this confused incident that happened at night, six other soldiers were wounded. A Lieutenant Simon Cupples who was leading the platoon rallied his men and made four attempts to recover the wounded and killed from the beaten zone of the ambush. Three stricken soldiers were evacuated in this way. On a fifth attempt to recover the last body, Cupples was beaten back by the sheer weight of fire. Leaving behind a fallen comrade was quite unconscionable so Cupples reorganised his remaining men and led a final rescue attempt that succeeded in recovering the body. For this desperate and inspirational leadership Cupples was awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Cross. Corporal Brelsford, who had placed his body between the line of fire and the casualties, was awarded a posthumous Military Cross.[439] On 20 September, another two soldiers were killed in an accident. In their last month the regiment's fatality rate had doubled. The Grenadier Guards, by comparison, suffered five fatalities between the beginning of May and the end of their tour.

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For the 1 Royal Anglian battlegroup it had been an especially arduous six months. Over 100 company and platoon operations had been conducted by the men of East Anglia – a quite unprecedented operational tempo in the British Army's recent history. Nine Royal Anglians had been killed (three by friendly fire) and the battlegroup as a whole had suffered twelve fatalities. Sixty-eight soldiers had been wounded in action and a further eighty-five had been lost through non-combat related injuries. Overall the battlegroup lost one fifth of its strength – 165 men.[440] This level of attrition had not been experienced since the Falklands Conflict. The difference between this latter conflict and the expanding war in Helmand was, of course, their duration. For how long could Britain's down-sized infantry battalions sustain this level of attrition? The Royal Anglians had been involved in 354 gun fights, or roughly two for every day of their six month tour.[441] The soldiers expended over a million bullets, twice the number that 3 Para expended in the previous summer. More than 500 grenades were posted. A large number of the newly-procured Javelin missile were fired off – eighty-seven in total, representing over £6 million's worth of missiles to kill gunmen armed with AK-47s. The regiment lobbed over 18,000 mortar bombs, called over 160 artillery fire missions and requested more than 150 close air support missions.

The increase in aerial bombing was arresting. The soldiers had, in effect, bombed and blasted their way across the Green Zone. In August 2005 NATO aircraft dropped just twenty bombs in Afghanistan. By the following summer (when the 3 Para battlegroup was fighting for survival in the platoon houses) this figure jumped to 242 bombs. A year later the figure had almost tripled to 670 bombs.[442] By historical standards these were not large numbers, a point examined more fully in a later chapter, but the damage was localised and concentrated. The British contribution to this aerial bombardment remained modest. Harrier GR.9 over the course of 2007 dropped 110 Paveways (guided bombs), and, astonishingly, 76 dumb or unguided bombs – a measure of the inadequacies the RAF was still labouring under, four years after the Blair government had taken the country to war in Iraq. Over 700 close air support missions had been requested.

A frustrating twist to this tale of destruction was the manner in which compensation payments were granted to Helmandis. The civil servants at the Lashkar Gah PRT ruled that no compensation should be paid to farmers whose compounds had been taken over by gunmen. As the farmers had little choice in the matter this unrealistic ruling implied that little or no compensation would be paid, a proposition that Lieutenant Colonel Stuart

Carver, the Commanding Officer of 1 Royal Anglian, found completely unacceptable. Unlike the civil servants who never ventured outside the walls of the PRT, he was acutely aware of the frictions and uncertainties of war. Eventually, after extensive lobbying, $100,000 was released for compensation payments. This was drawn from an ISAF rather than DfID fund, just as the battlegroup was leaving Helmand.

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1 Royal Anglian claimed that it killed over 1,000 Taliban and the brigade as a whole later claimed over twice this number. The numbers were exaggerated. Post-Second World War studies that compared Allied claims of enemy casualties with surviving German casualty records revealed that soldiers were prone to exaggerate enemy casualties by as much as a factor of ten. Vietnam became notorious for its fetishism and exaggeration of kill counts. Following Operation Allied Force in Kosovo, it transpired that NATO had exaggerated Serbian casualties by a factor of nine. No lessons seemed to be learned from these previous conflicts. The problem in Helmand was the evidence - there were few Taliban bodies. The casualty claims were mostly based on that most notorious of battlefield phenomena, ‘anecdotal reporting’. The Royal Anglians did kill and injure a significant number of fighters, but nowhere near the number claimed. Leaving aside the accuracy of the enemy body count there was a more serious question – what was the point of this attrition approach to warfare? Five years into the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the CIA estimated that 40,000 insurgents had been killed, but the insurgency had grown stronger not weaker.[443] The British had an awful long way to go before reaching these astronomic kill-count figures and their chances of success appeared as unpromising as those of the Soviet Army.

1 Royal Anglian was the last British infantry battalion to play by the ‘Brecon rules’. The platoon and section tactics adopted by the soldiers were recognisably those taught at the army’s unforgiving infantry school in the hills of the Brecon Beacons. Fire and manoeuvre, the maintenance of momentum and offensive spirit were all evident. Within a year these tactics would become quite impossible partly because of the loads infantrymen were being asked to shoulder and partly because the threat of IEDs. Royal Marines – famed for ‘yomping’ across the Falkland Islands - would report that a realistic daily marching distance for the average foot soldier had been reduced to just 800 metres.

12 Mechanised Brigade as a whole had been involved in more than 800 gun fights, or a weekly average of thirty.[444] Impressively, just under half of these actions had been initiated by the brigade. Brigadier Lorimer could justly claim that he had taken the fight to

the enemy. By the following summer, 2 Para would be reporting that '99 per cent' of gun battles were being initiated by the insurgents. The brigade's six month deployment had coincided with a period of relative lack of restrictions over the use of close air support (not to be confused with Rules of Engagement which were always rigorous from the beginning).[445] 12 Mechanised Brigade consequently enjoyed a golden age of close air support. Close to three million pounds of high explosives had been expended in Helmand's Green Zone, including over forty of the new GMLRS rockets. Soon, nervous ISAF commanders would limit the use of aircraft in support of ground operations. When 19 Light Brigade mounted a major five week operation two years later, just ten bombs were dropped. The aircraft were far busier than the attack helicopters because there were more of them, but the six British Apache still managed to mount over seventy missions in support of the ground troops (183 Hellfire missiles were launched). The brigade as a whole fired off 10,000 shells. It had unquestionably gone to war. To give an example of ammunition expenditure rates, in one of the larger clearance operations in the Green Zone the brigade fired off nearly 90,000 7.62mm rounds, over 700 mortar bombs and shells, and dropped more than ten bombs. As it was almost certain that the Apache and close support aircraft were accounting for the majority of insurgent casualties, this amounted to a large, cacophonous and largely prophylactic waste of ammunition.

Over the course of the summer fighting 12 Mechanised Brigade had been helped by a series of American-led decapitation operations that weakened the Taliban leadership, forcing it to re-think its tactics. In total, three members of the ten man ruling *shura* were killed. They included Mullah Obaidullah, the former Taliban defence minister who had maintained links with insurgent groups in eastern Afghanistan, and Mullah Akhtar Osmani, the former 2 Corps commander in Kandahar who had contacts with both bin Laden and Iranian sympathisers. More importantly, Mullah Dadullah Lang, the Taliban's most ruthless and charismatic battlefield leader was caught off guard and killed in the border areas. Dadullah 'the lame', so-called because he lost a leg in the Soviet-Afghan War, had been a thorn in Mullah Omar's side because of his independent nature. He had also displayed strong psychopathic tendencies in the past, reportedly once beheading eight prisoners and filming the event. Still, he could not afford to lose one of his best lieutenants. Faced with these heavy losses Mullah Omar issued a decree ordering his district commanders to adopt hit and run tactics. Many would take heed of the last piece of advice and take up temporary, self-imposed exile in the relative safety of Pakistan.

The fighting experienced over the summer proved fertile soil for acts of bravery. There

were 184 gallantry awards that year including five Conspicuous Gallantry Crosses, twenty-eight Military Crosses, and three Distinguished Flying Crosses. The Royal Anglians alone won six Military Crosses, a highly unusual tally for a single regiment. One of the most popular winners of a posthumous Military Cross was Captain David Hicks. Due to retire from the Army, Hicks had volunteered to extend his service to see out the Afghanistan tour before being killed in the attack on FOB Inkerman at the beginning of August. Two Royal Anglian company commanders were awarded Military Crosses for inspirational leadership in battle, along with a Corporal Robert Moore who despite being shot in the arm and losing a fillet of muscle continued to command his section until relieved. A young lad from South Uist in the Hebrides was awarded a Conspicuous Gallantry Cross for driving a civilian plant vehicle in full view of gunmen bent on killing him. Lance Corporal Donald Campbell, serving with the Royal Engineers, continued to operate the plant, disregarding bullets pinging off the unprotected vehicle, until he managed to successfully lay a bridge.[446] A twenty-two year old Private Luke Cole serving with the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters was also awarded the Military Cross. A Territorial Army soldier who in peacetime worked as a forklift driver, Cole was caught in an ambush and lost part of his leg. He continued to fight even after a second bullet hit him in the stomach, stuffing his shirt into the open wound to staunch the bleeding. The citation read like an incident from the Second World War.[447]

By the time 12 Mechanised Brigade's campaign in the Green Zone began to wind down in preparation for the handover to the replacement brigade, a tone of hubris had begun to replace the optimism of the spring. The question raised by the end of the summer: - what had been the overall effect of the military campaign? – had no clear answer. There was no national or provincial political solution in sight. The ANA was clearly not ready to undertake major military operations and would require close mentoring for several years. The poppy crop had enjoyed another bumper year which would fill the Taliban's coffers over the winter months. Nobody had fully anticipated the debilitating effects of the heat. Hundreds of tons of bottled water had been shifted to keep the troops moving. Understanding of Helmand's 'micro-environments' – the tribal affiliations and rivalries – had been poor and, as a consequence, some operations had been clumsy. Despite the mantra that the population was at the centre of British counter-insurgency doctrine, that population had proved determinedly hostile and resistant to hearts and minds.

Given these reservations, had the brigade achieved its mission? It was always unlikely that 12 Mechanised Brigade would downplay its own achievements. Thirty-two soldiers

had been killed including three Danes and one Estonian. At the sharp end, officers like Major Dominic Biddick who commanded Norfolk Company felt that his soldiers had shown 'what the British Army is capable of'.[448] From the viewpoint of the task force headquarters, Lorimer had set out to plant British flags in the Taliban's backyard and this is what his brigade had done. A conclusion was drawn that security had improved and that conditions were now set for reconstruction. In an interview with *The Observer* newspaper at the Lashkar Gah PRT, Lorimer offered the following long-term view:

'If you look at the insurgency then it could take maybe 10 years. Counter-narcotics, it's 30 years. If you're looking at governance and so on, it looks a little longer.'[449]

At least the outgoing commander could not be accused of being over-optimistic. His boss, the Defence Secretary Des Browne, told his American counterpart Robert Gates at a meeting in London on 11 October:

'Our key to understanding success is about recognising that Afghanistan is a long term effort. Progress there is measured in terms of whether we are heading in the right direction. On these metrics, the mission is being successful and is seeing success.'[450]

A marine Warrant Officer writing in the *British Army Review*, however, questioned the whole basis of the British strategy. At the heart of this strategy was an obsession with holding ground, the very opposite of a mobile approach to warfare. Watching the news, he could not help but notice the 12 Mechanised Brigade had been fighting over exactly the same ground where he had fought, and indeed where 3 Para had squabbled with the locals. We seem, as he put it, to be fixated with holding ground.[451]

He was right. The British were fighting over the same ground and would continue to do so virtually for the remainder of the war (or until relieved by US marines). Security, far from improving, was worsening. The virtues of agility and manoeuvre taught in staff courses had evaporated in the heat and mud of Helmand's Green Zone. How did you get a collection of coalition partners to operate smoothly in a narrow corridor of treacherous hedge lines, ditches and orchards that could conceal a sniper or bomb? The answer was that you couldn't, easily. Operation Silver – an operation that lasted a matter of days - took a mountain of paperwork to plan, weeks to prepare and involved British, American, Canadian, Danish, Estonian, and Afghan soldiers. In the end, security in Sangin was not restored. Such an overwhelming show of force was bound to push local insurgents underground, for a period, but it was such a cumbersome way to wage war. The vision of an agile and mobile counter-insurgency campaign was entirely sunk in the fields and

ditches between Sangin and Gereshk in the summer of 2007.

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While the Army struggled with its war in Helmand, Kabul seemed remote and even detached. With 128 diplomatic staff, the British Embassy in Kabul was one of the largest in the world. Ambassador Sherard Cowper-Coles took to blogging, and some of his blogs were eye-popping:

‘The coolest man in the Embassy, and perhaps Kabul, Richard Rose, who is the spokesman for the Department for International Development (DFID), who have a huge operation here, asked me round for a bout of boxing on his new Nintendo Wii. Needless to say, he knocked me out - electronically of course - in the second round. But the Wii was seriously wicked, with lots of jumping around with the remote in front of a huge projected image of the game.’

The point of this blog, it seemed, was to suggest connection with youth, hence the use of words like ‘cool’, and phrases like ‘seriously wicked’. But the impression given was awful. This was Britain’s most senior representative in Afghanistan playing Nintendo boxing with the spokesman of an organisation that was failing to achieve any meaningful reconstruction, hundreds of kilometres away from a frontline where British soldiers were now dying on a weekly basis. Rome burned while Nero fiddled?

CHAPTER 6
THE PRIZE IS THE POPULATION
Operation HERRICK 7
7 October 2007 – April 2008

At one minute past midnight on Wednesday 10 October 2007, Brigadier Andrew Mackay, Commander of 52 (Lowland) Infantry Brigade, assumed command of Task Force Helmand in southern Afghanistan. One of the features of the British war– at least for the first three years – was the manner in which incoming brigade commanders sought to tackle the counter-insurgency in the light of their own preconceptions and beliefs. In the absence of firm political direction, as well as a lack of campaign leadership from PJHQ, Helmand had become a laboratory for counter-insurgency theories. The failure of 'the comprehensive approach' also created a vacuum which the task force commanders more than readily filled. As the CDS Air Chief Marshal Jock Stirrup would later remark with some frustration over his army colleagues:

'It was my experience - I think I am right in saying that I had nine brigade commanders in my time as CDS - that everyone discovered counter-insurgency afresh all by himself, or at least that is the impression one got, going up there. It became a bit frustrating.'[452]

This led to the allegation that too many brigadiers were 'seeking the bubble reputation even in the cannon's mouth'[453], in the Shakespearean phrase - or more prosaically, that they were writing their own promotion reports by mounting 'signature operations'.

Never was the contrast between two brigade commanders more acute than between Lorimer, the outgoing brigade commander, and Mackay. Both sincerely believed they had the right approach to counter-insurgency. Both were intelligent and reasonable men. Both brought experience and impressive commitment to the job. It was noteworthy then that both chose exactly opposing approaches to the task of defeating the Taliban.

Brigadier Andrew Mackay was not one of the glamorous younger brigadiers in the

army. He sported no parachute badges or commando daggers. His extensive experience in post-conflict environments included staff and command appointments in IFOR, SFOR, and KFOR; overseeing justice and security reforms in Kosovo; and training police in Baghdad. He belonged to an older generation of soldiers and he was immensely loyal to his brigade. 52 Infantry Brigade was a 'territorial brigade' rather than a front line brigade. Based at Edinburgh's Redford Cavalry Barracks, the brigade's main business before the war had been humdrum regional training and civic events, not fighting a real enemy. 52 Infantry Brigade had great experience in organizing military tattoos and none in fighting the Taliban. If the army had not been down-sized, the brigade would never have been raised to fighting strength and sent on operations – it was an index of continuing manpower problems that this regional brigade was being mustered at all. Everybody was conscious of the brigade's lower league origins and Brigadier Mackay was determined to put any doubters in their place.

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One of the main problems facing Mackay, as commentators like Cordesman persuasively argued, was that the war in Afghanistan was not the war that ISAF had wanted or planned for; it had metamorphosed from a legitimate act of self-defence in response to the September 11 attacks into a drifting counter-insurgency without clear purpose, rationale, or adequate resources. Historian Donald Mrozek's description of the Vietnam War would have served equally well for Afghanistan: the conflict had become 'a creature with no creator'. This creature had outgrown the master leaving behind pathetic self-deception or 'the ache of irresolution'.[454]

'Mission creep' spread with viral speed. NATO was now embroiled in several wars, against several actors across Afghanistan ranging from former warlords in the east to criminal gangs in the south-west, and none of these wars had an obvious or speedy resolution. In this war, Cordesman argued, Taliban-bashing was proving fruitless.[455]

An all-embracing and comprehensive civilian as well as military strategy for resolving this mess was entirely absent. Instead, ISAF had a plethora of 'plans', no sooner promulgated than changed by the next general on a six month tour, and a civil mission that was badly failing to offer any credible programs. In the unimpeachable judgement of another Vietnam War author – an anonymous contributor to the Pentagon Papers - '… premises were transformed into conclusions, desiderata institutionalized as objectives, and wish took on the character of the force of imperative'.[456] Such was ISAF in 2007.

The insurgency was only one problem among many intractable problems. The opium poppy crop had again reached record levels. Since 2002, the United States alone had provided over $1.5 billion to stem the production and trafficking of illicit drugs in Afghanistan. Despite American and more modest British efforts in counter-narcotics, the UN estimated that by the time 52 Brigade arrived in 2007, opium poppy cultivation increased again by 17 per cent from 165,000 to 193,000 hectares. About four fifths of farming families in Helmand grew the opium poppy, which provided them with 35 per cent of their annual income. In 2007 this was estimated at $528 million.[457] This implied that four fifths of Helmand's farmers enjoyed some sort of relationship with the Taliban as it was the insurgents who provided the protection to the farmers and traffickers. The overwhelming vested interest was not weighted in favour of a defeat of the Taliban. The income derived by the Taliban was not less than $50 million – applying the crude ten per cent *ushr* tax – but from numerous spin-off businesses, including heroin production, it was almost certainly higher. Across the country the UN estimated that the total value of opium and its derivatives was equal to at least a third of Afghanistan's licit economy.[458] This was a country addicted to criminality.

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The Afghan National Security Forces were too small and incapable of dealing with the myriad problems facing Afghanistan. There were perhaps just 20,000 ANA, of which probably one quarter were absent from duty anyway, and just over 60,000 ANP. Absenteeism and corruption in the latter was endemic. A US GAO report soberly noted that just one of the seventy-two police units established post the 2001 invasion was actually capable of operating alongside Western forces.[459] It also noted that six years after the US-led invasion, Afghanistan still had no nation-wide judiciary system, which made the police at best ineffectual and at worst rapacious dispensers of corrupt justice. Traditional mechanisms for solving disputes as well as the prompt Taliban justice system prevailed across wide swathes of rural Afghanistan.

Reconstruction also remained at too small a scale and the different national PRTs were not co-ordinated. In terms of international trade, Afghanistan's exports were naturally dominated by illicit narcotics which had an estimated total value of $2.7-2.8 billion per year, according to the World Bank. By contrast, officially recorded exports were estimated at several hundred million dollars. In 2005, the most recent year for which data was available, development assistance from international donors was estimated at $2.8 billion, or over a third the size of the national economy. How much of this pledged money was

actually spent (and how) could not be explained with any confidence. ISAF remained a divided alliance – divisions that would be exposed as Brigadier Mackay found himself relying on American boots and firepower to recapture Musa Qaleh. At beginning of 2007, when 52 Infantry Brigade deployed, there were 107 national caveats in place within ISAF. The military ideal of 'unity of action' had to grind through the sand-clogged cogs of these caveats every time ISAF attempted to launch a multinational operation.

Nationwide, violence had grown by over 30 per cent. In 2006 there had been a monthly average of over 400 attacks. By 2007 this had climbed to a monthly average of 566 attacks.[460] In 2002, there had been just twenty-two IED attacks in Afghanistan. By 2007, there were this many IED attacks every week.[461] A suicide attack was now happening every three days and Afghanistan was becoming a prohibitively dangerous country for aid workers – forty had been killed and double this number had been abducted in the previous year.[462] A US CENTCOM brief reported that only 183 of some 1,767 armed illegal groups had pledged to disband and hand in their weapons (somewhat putting the problem of 'the Taliban' in perspective). This meagre result had yielded (along with cache finds), an astonishing total of almost 30,000 light weapons and over 4,000 heavy weapons. The total amount of ammunition collected was just over 9,000 metric tons.[463] Privately, Western diplomats assessed that there were at least 3,000 illegal militias still at large in Afghanistan.[464] 'The Taliban' was truly a label of convenience that barely reflected the fractured, armed state of Afghanistan. The number of weapons and tonnage of ammunition still at large could only be speculated. It was probably not an exaggeration to assume that every male of fighting age in Afghanistan owned at least a rifle.

In short, ISAF was badly failing the Abrams test, named after General Creighton Abrams who closed America's war in Vietnam. The General, weary of being assured that a district in Vietnam had been secured, posed the challenge: if he could not walk somewhere during the day, or drive somewhere at night, without protection, then security had not been achieved. Nowhere in Helmand passed the Abrams test, or ever would.

52 Infantry Brigade deployed with four infantry battalions, an increase of one battalion on the previous brigade. The 1st Battalion Coldstream Guards, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel George Waters, deployed in late September, although the battalion complete would not arrive in Helmand until the end of October. The lack of RAF transport aircraft to fly the infantry battalions in one lift to theatre (or an unwillingness to bear the cost of contracting civilian aircraft) meant that units were still arriving in Helmand in dribs and

drabs, eighteen months after Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Tootal, the 3 Para commanding officer, had complained about the disruptive effect this caused. The principal role of the Coldstream Guards would be to act as mentors for the ANA as well providing manning for the newly-formed Joint District Coordination Centres in Kajaki, Sangin, Gereshk and Garmsir. These JDCCs were viewed as key to co-ordinating one of the pillars in the British strategy - 'Security Sector Reform' - or the training of the ANA and ANP. This, as every previous unit reported, continued to be a source of great frustrations. Captain Russell who commanded the Reconnaissance Platoon and was responsible for training an ANP company commonly recalled turning up for work and finding 'thoroughly high coppers who only have an interest in the monetary side of their work'.[465]

Of the remainder of the battalion, Number 1 Company was deployed to Kabul where it would remain for the duration of the tour providing security for the British civilian mission in the capital. This was compensated by taking under command the Right Flank Company of the Scots Guards mounted in Warriors. The armoured personnel carriers were flown to Kandahar, two at a time in giant Antonov transporters, and then made the hazardous 185 kilometre road journey to Camp Bastion, before redeploying temporarily to FOB Arnhem. This company would fight a gruelling war, deployed in the field for all but twelve days of the tour. One would probably have to go back to the Second World War to find a British Army company spending such an extended period living out of the back of armoured vehicles. By the end of the tour, the Warriors had become the guardsmen's homes. The insurgents came to know them as the 'Desert Devils'.

This only left a single Coldstream rifle company – Number 3 Company – to undertake operations in the Green Zone. This company was deployed to the Battlegroup North area, in FOB Keenan, where it would later be joined by a Danish contingent.[466] The guardsmen took over the base from A Company of the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters. On completing his reconnaissance of the various outposts Lieutenant Colonel Waters noticed just how basic living conditions were at FOB Keenan, possibly, he mused, to encourage his guardsmen to 'get out and find the Taliban'.[467] Later in the tour Waters would revisit this company and find himself stuck for five days because of the 'disgraceful' lack of helicopters. His complaint was wholly justified – the entire brigade was being supported by just seven helicopters of which, on any given day, probably four were available.[468] When the operation to recapture Musa Qaleh was mounted, this was, in fact, the maximum number of support helicopters the British could muster.

The second infantry battalion was provided by the Green Howards (soon to be 2 Yorks)

whose regimental head was the new Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt. A Company was deployed alongside 40 Commando in Sangin and took over the manning of Waterloo, Tangiers, Nijmegen and Blenheim patrol bases (the marines were deployed to make up for the lack of available army infantry battalions). The majority of this battalion was split into four OMLTs (Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams) to act as mentors to the ANA. This important training role would be overtaken by events later in the tour. In November, a company of the Green Howards was deployed to FOB Arnhem to release the Right Flank Company Scots Guards that would take part in the major operation of the brigade's tour – the expulsion of the Taliban from Musa Qaleh. The remainder of the battalion would also be committed to this operation. A Company, together with the reconnaissance platoon, would be left behind in Musa Qaleh, following the conclusion of the operation, to take over a newly established district centre in a half-built 'hotel' on the edge of the town. Before the arrival the British, this building, which was adjacent to the governor's offices and a barracks, was being used to store opium – a perfect illustration of the nexus between the local Taliban, drug traffickers and the civil authorities. The Green Howards also importantly provided the core of the Brigade Reconnaissance Force which initially assisted the Coldstream Guards with 'hearts and minds' tasks in the Lower Gereshk Valley, and later became involved in the retaking of Musa Qaleh.

The third infantry unit was drawn from 1 Royal Gurkha Rifles, which deployed with three rifle companies. A and C Companies were deployed to Kandahar where they acted as the regional reserve and were later joined by B Company of the Royal Welsh. B Company was deployed to southern Helmand and took over FOBs Dwyer and Delhi. The latter base would host Prince Henry of Wales, covertly deployed to Helmand following a gentleman's agreement with the media that would later be broken. The Gurkha native language, Gurkhali, was sufficiently related to the Pashto and Dari tongues to allow basic communication with the locals – an important advantage which the British soldiers in the task force did not enjoy. The Gurkhas were also superb and hardy soldiers. In their six month tour they suffered just one fatality (from the IED strike at the beginning), a testament to their professionalism.

The fourth infantry unit for the brigade was provided by 40 Commando. Although the marines had only just left the province six month's previously, the combination of a lack of army infantry units and the 'arms plot' (essentially the system of rotation of units) meant that a marine commando had to be 'borrowed' to take the brigade to full strength. This unit was deployed to the Battlegroup North area and operated from Sangin, Now Zad and Kajaki. The Marine Armoured Support Group equipped with Vikings also remained

with the brigade.

C Squadron of the Household Cavalry in the meantime had taken over from the Light Dragoons and deployed to the Battlegroup South area (FOBs Dwyer and Delhi) where it was judged that the tracked Scimitar vehicles would be best employed in the open desert. Later in the tour the Household Cavalry would form a composite battlegroup that would take part in the operation to reclaim Musa Qaleh. To the disappointment of the cavalrymen very little had changed since their tour in the summer of 2006. Most of the vehicles they were driving were older than the troopers – just keeping the Scimitars on the road without constantly having to stop to deal with break downs was a major challenge.

The failure to provide the Royal Armoured Corps with a new reconnaissance vehicle - to replace a vehicle whose design dated to the 1950s - was a procurement headache that had simmered without resolution for decades. The army had originally procured 486 Scimitars. Scimitar, which was part of the larger CVR(T) fleet of related vehicles, was actually a success story and a highly innovative vehicle in its time.[469] Like so many other British industrial success stories of the post-war period it withered in the poisoned soil of poor industrial relations and drifting government defence policies. The Alvis factory at Coventry was allowed to close. This spelled the end of the obvious successor to this vehicle, a six-wheeled longer variant that had already been produced and fielded as an engineer and air defence vehicle (Shielder and Stormer). Over thirty years, the replacement so-called Family of Light Armoured Vehicles (FLAV) program became the Future Family of Light Armoured Vehicles (FFLAV) program; which became the Tactical Reconnaissance Armoured Combat Equipment Requirement (TRACER) program; which became the Multi-Role Armoured Vehicle (MRAV) program; which became the impossibly futuristic Future Rapid Effects System Specialist Vehicle (FRES-SV) program - and not a single vehicle was added to the fleet of the Royal Armoured Corps. Not one.

By the time the British Army deployed to Helmand the original Scimitar fleet had shrunk by a third of which only about 160 vehicles were still working.[470] Within three years the government would have to tender a contract to re-start the production of the CVR(T) (with BAE Systems) because the surviving vehicles were literally falling apart. They were also too vulnerable to IEDs and eventually an upgraded vehicle based on the Spartan chassis – CVR(T)2 – was brought into service. In the end, nearly sixty years would elapse between the original design of this reconnaissance vehicle and a successor vehicle, the Scout – possibly the longest procurement in British military history. The total cost to the taxpayer of these multiple procurement programs, that procured nothing, is now

probably incalculable. The number of individuals who comfortably retired off these programs, some with gongs, is also probably not reckonable.

52 Infantry Brigade was also supported in Helmand by enlarged Danish and Estonian contingents. The British were extremely fortunate with these two allies and relations were excellent throughout – not a small achievement given the tensions generated in a war. Transfer of Authority of the Gereshk area to the Danish battlegroup was finally formalised during the 52 Infantry Brigade's tour, releasing British troops for operations elsewhere. The Danes remained at FOB Price located to the west of Gereshk and also took responsibility for the ring of patrol bases east of the town. The Danish battlegroup was roughly comparable to a British battlegroup but included unique resources, not least the only tanks in Helmand; a troop of Leopard 2A6. The now thirty strong Danish CIMIC team (Civil Military Co-operation) was also proving highly effective and was embarrassingly showing up the lack of British reconstruction programs elsewhere (the Danish reconstruction plan was in fact adopted by the British PRT in Lashkar Gah, although complaints over resources persisted).[471] The Estonians provided a mechanised company whose soldiers proved doughty fighters, some having previously fought for the Soviet Army in Afghanistan. This company would take over responsibility for Now Zad, a town completely gutted by fighting, which it later handed over to US marines in the following year.

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For the Danish, fighting alongside the British proved a mixed experience. The Danish battlegroup would suffer the highest number of casualties per capita of any ISAF contributor (forty soldiers killed and 153 wounded by February 2011).[472] The Danes uniquely and generously offered their battlegroup to the British without any national caveats but were marginalised in the production of the Helmand Plan because this document was classified 'UK Eyes Only'. Essentially, the British brigade commander told the Danish commander what to do and, by military protocol, he complied. This proved a frustrating business. The swings in British tactics inevitably affected the Danish contingent which was used in various roles, not all of which were viewed as appropriate.[473] The Danish battlegroup would struggle to hold the line north of Gereshk, partly because it was consistently let down by the ANA and ANP who would withdraw from patrol bases with little or no warning, and partly because British task force commanders could not resist the temptation to use Danish soldiers to support operations elsewhere in Helmand. A consequence was that patrol bases like Spondon and Malvern, which British

battlegroups had established at some cost at the beginning of the war, were subsequently abandoned and looted by locals. In the end the Danish battlegroup became so stretched that in a major base like FOB Budwan, not a single patrol was mounted in the last two months of the summer 2010 tour – every available soldier was being used to guard the base, or was committed to other tasks. Budwan would eventually be abandoned along with the entire Upper Gereshk Valley and the Danish frontline would be pulled back to a patrol line immediately north-east of Gereshk, or exactly where the British had started in 2006. This was a setback by any definition but the Danish could hardly be blamed. The experience of the Danes merely reflected the wider experience of the British task force – too few troops attempting to secure too much ground.

52 Infantry Brigade benefited from new equipment that had begun to arrive in theatre with the previous brigade. The two Israeli Hermes 450 UAVs, leased by the British government, were beginning to provide useful intelligence. The feed from these aerial platforms was played on plasma screens at the Task Force HQ but more importantly, Fire Support Teams (FSTs) on the ground, equipped with American Rover III terminals, could also view the footage. This capability was greatly welcomed but British dependency on foreign expertise and technology was again exposed. Civilian contractors were also needed to keep the UAVs flying (and crucially to land the UAVs safely). Britain had once supplied Israel with arms to fight its wars. Now the situation was reversed. The Hermes 450 detachment was joined in November by the RAF's first Reaper UAV and in early December by an upgraded variant of the mini-UAV Desert Hawk. Both were American-manufactured. The British had already deployed with Desert Hawk I but losses and accidents had severely depleted the inventory. Reaper – a variant of the popular Predator UAV – was another marvel of American technology and industrial prowess. This medium altitude UAV had been designed, developed and fielded at dazzling speed, in sharp contrast to the procurement of the British Phoenix (which incidentally took longer to procure than it was actually in service). The original contract was awarded to General Atomics in the winter of 1994. By July 1995, the first aircraft was flying. By the following summer, the first three Predators were operational over the skies of the Balkans. The aircraft enjoyed twenty-four hour endurance and could climb to the same height as civil airliners. A variety of surveillance pods could be fitted to the nose and hard points on the wings allowed the UAV to be armed with Hellfire missiles or a range of small bombs.[474] The British would be conducting armed Reaper missions by the summer of 2008.[475] For the RAF that had just retired its last Canberra – a museum-piece aircraft – Reaper represented salvation. 39 Squadron was reformed as a UAV squadron and 1115 Flight

decamped to Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada (from where the British had to fly their Reaper because the American-owned infrastructure needed to support Predator operations was not budgeted). Nobody in 1115 Flight protested at the inconvenience of being posted to Nevada.

The problem of IEDs was also being addressed more convincingly; the original Ebex mine detector was phased out and replaced by the more sensitive two-tone German Vallon mine detector. Over time this latter mine detector would be supplemented by more sensitive and specialized detectors, again all foreign manufactured, as IEDs became more difficult to detect.

Brigadier Mackay was probably the most thoughtful task force commander who served in Helmand and he would eventually resign his commission, it was speculated, from a sense of disappointment over the manner in which the war was being prosecuted.

From the outset Mackay was clear that, in the words of the much-quoted adage: 'the insurgent wins if he does not lose and we lose if we do not win'.[476] Nobody could disagree with this, but what did winning mean? Did it necessarily mean winning battles? Or winning ground? Or was the task force just winning time for a lagging political process? For Mackay, what really mattered was winning the population and at the heart of his counter-insurgency philosophy was the phrase 'the prize is the population'. In this respect, Mackay played John the Baptist to the Messiah McChrystal.

Countering the tide of positive reporting from Helmand, Mackay was ruthlessly honest about the limitations and challenges facing the British task force, as well as his own frailties. 'How could anyone,' he conceded with some humility, 'capture the totality of what we are engaged in?'[477] Nobody, he argued with some truth, not even the Afghans, truly understood the complex interplay of tribal relationships and power struggles bubbling in Helmand.

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The enemy that appeared to have been well-beaten by 12 Mechanised Brigade's summer offensive could not be underestimated. The Taliban had not been cowed by the multi-billion dollar display of Western military technology. Instead the insurgents appeared to be constantly adapting. Reading all the counter-insurgency classics and manuals served no purpose unless the task force – from private soldier to senior officer – looked hard at the specific reality of Helmand, learned from experience, pooled that common experience, and adapted like the insurgent. In this respect Mackay was like an art

teacher urging his students to study the life model more closely and not to draw what they thought was a good drawing, but rather to draw what was in front of them. What he wanted from his officers and men was questioning and open minds, not orthodoxies:

'The successful counter-insurgents are those that are able to join the dots that create a vision that others have not seen, think laterally, integrate capabilities that no one else had thought of and who constantly question perceived wisdom.'[478]

Winning for Mackay could not be achieved by defeating the Taliban in any military sense. Winning was about perception. It would only be achieved by wresting the consent of the population away from the insurgent. Mackay would later write a thesis expounding his philosophy of 'influence operations' and leave it as a parting shot to the army he served for twenty-nine years.[479]

This should not have been a forlorn hope given the general unpopularity of the Taliban but the British, so far, had made very heavy weather of it. In the same way that Thomas had warned that every bullet discharged was a potential tactical victory for the Taliban, so Mackay argued that every action undertaken by British soldiers created a perception in the eyes of the local tribesmen, positive or negative. It behoved the counter-insurgent therefore to scrupulously ensure that every action represented a positive influence, as only by influencing the perceptions of the population would that population be won over. Bluntly, 'the more force is used, the less effective it is'.[480] Mackay was so firm on this point that he prohibited body counts which he viewed as 'a corrupt measure of success', and he insisted that no such statistics be presented on Powerpoint slides (a side rebuke to the previous brigade that had been quite keen to boast over how many insurgents it claimed to kill).[481] Nobody should be fooled, he argued, by the difficulty of the task the British had set themselves: 'In this business anything that resembles 70% is good enough'.[482] By some measures the task force was falling short of even this B minus.

There was a counter-argument to this philosophy of 'influence operations' and it was that the people did not want to be won over – most Helmandis just wanted ISAF to leave. General Sir Frederick Roberts' famous quote (which would be used to headline an exhibition on Britain's Afghan wars at the National Army Museum in London) carried an important germ of truth:

'We have nothing to fear from Afghanistan, and the best thing to do is to leave it as much as possible to itself. It may not be very flattering to our amour propre but I feel sure I am right when I say that the less the Afghans see of us the less they will dislike us.'

In the winter of 2007 ISAF could not take this option. Whether they liked it or not, Helmand's farmers were going to see a lot more of the Westerners for the foreseeable future. The second strong counter-argument was that a now aroused enemy would not be 'influenced' and could only be killed. This task, as we shall see, fell to the American Task Force 1 Fury that was much less impressed with notions of mysteriously 'influencing' the Taliban into defeat.

This then was Mackay's counter-insurgency philosophy: persuasion, not force, lateral thinking and not literal thinking, the population and not the insurgent as the prize – but how was it being interpreted by his brigade 'outside the wire'?

Once the companies had settled in at their several bases, familiarization patrols and the odd gun battle with locals soon became the daily routine. Traditionally, the winter had always been the fighting off-season in Afghanistan, partly because of the weather, and partly because of the lack of cover. When Number 3 Company of the Coldstream Guards took over FOB Keenan, about fifteen kilometres north of Gereshk, they found themselves under immediate attack from local gunmen, The base was no more than a large compound by a village called Khan Nikeh Hadirah, but the thick mud-brick walls offered good protection against the inaccurate enemy fire. Major Charles commanding the company described the first attack:

'As luck would have it on our first night in role after the previous company had left the Taleban decided to greet us with a combined attack of mortars, small arms fire and rocket propelled grenades! Thankfully such are their poor operating skills they failed to hit the target. We however were more precise. But this did not put off the Taleban as they came again the very next night only this time an hour later. This time with more weapons at our disposal we managed to give them even more of a bloody nose, so much so that since this failed attack they have not bothered us again.'[483]

After these futile attacks on the newcomers the gunmen changed tactics and started ambushing patrols mounted from the base. These attacks similarly failed to cause any casualties and the attacks began to peter out. The guardsmen themselves also had to curtail patrolling due to the unreliability of the generator in the base which meant they could not recharge the batteries for their radios or electronic counter-measures equipment. In the end there was a temporary stalemate brought about by poor logistics on the British side and a cultural indisposition to fight in cold weather on the Afghan side.

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The sudden deterioration in the weather saw the level of attacks drop dramatically although the threat of a chance encounter with armed villagers never went away. In fact, FOB Keenan was not attacked again until 6 December which the guardsmen attributed to their lack of patrolling, having been forced to maintain a platoon at constant readiness as a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) for the brigade.[484] This suggested that a peaceful *modus vivendi* was being maintained, *not* by patrolling, but by staying out of sight and thus not giving the locals an excuse to start a gun battle. Once this task passed to another unit, the Coldstream company resumed its tactic of sending out patrols at night. These remained hidden and only emerged 'from ditches and streams, to the astonishment of the locals, during the middle of the day'.[485] This simple tactic appeared to act as a significant deterrent. The local trouble-makers were never really quite sure where the army patrols were until they unmasked, frequently in their midst. In their entire six months at FOB Keenan the guardsmen only bothered to mount two deliberate operations (Operations Spotty Dog Bark and Growl in January) which barely met any resistance. If one example could be plucked from Operation Herrick 7 of the successful balancing of aggressive counter-insurgency tactics and 'hearts and minds', the experience of Number 3 Company of the Coldstream Guards would be it.

For local, mainly Ishaqzai tribesmen in nearby villages the pressing business became compensation claims. When it became apparent that the guardsmen were prepared to pay compensation for war damage, a trickle of claims turned into a torrent. A free weekly medical clinic also became popular and the guardsmen donated loudspeaker systems and blankets to local mosques to generate goodwill. A shura was held, which had its comical moment when an American helicopter flew overhead:

'This [shura] went down extremely well and was only briefly interrupted when the tent that the thirty odd attendees were sat in took off and then promptly collapsed - an American Chinook decided to hover over the Shura… The scene was reminiscent of something from the Monty Python Show as a group of thirty hysterical Afghans struggled to pull themselves out of the tarpaulin crying with laughter.'[486]

The tent may have collapsed but the persistence paid off and meetings like this led to more shuras and confidence-building with the local population.

Over the next two months Number 3 Company made genuine gains in winning the trust of the local population, and not a shot was fired, one of the rare instances where 'hearts and minds' succeeded in the early years of the war. Much of the credit must go to the

guardsmen who seemed to display both aptitude and patience to win over the normally suspicious farmers. Acknowledgement must also be given to the Danish CIMIC team, attached to the Guards company. Crucially, the Danes came armed with funds which the guardsmen were able spend on Consent Winning Activities (CWA). As DfID was pointedly restricting funds to the soldiers, on the ideological grounds that reconstruction money should not be spent to support military objectives, the Danish common sense approach was greatly welcomed.

Organising these confidence-winning measures – ultimately setting foundations for the success or failure of the British mission in Helmand - was a responsibility laid on very young shoulders. In Number 3 Company, the entire effort was being run by a Lieutenant Law and a small team of dedicated NCOs. Major Charles, again, described this side of his soldiers:

'The men have been showing their softer side in dealing with the locals. A 2 year old girl was brought to our camp the other day with injuries to her head and shoulder. The level of medical assistance and knowlegde [sic] out here is extremely basic so her parents could do little for her. However, LCpl Constantine did some stirling [sic] work whilst getting through most of his sweet selection, before she was extracted back to Camp Bastion for some proper medical attention…Aside from the medical condition the little girl required it was evident that her physical size was far smaller than that expected of an average child of the same age back in the UK. Clearly undernourished, the provision of food for families is a real concern.'[487]

Before the guardsmen left FOB Keenan in the first week of March they would make a gruesome discovery. In a nearby compound they discovered an underground chamber that had been clearly used for torture. Among the items found were shackles, electrical wires, bamboo canes, and two blood-stained policemen's uniforms. One of the uniforms was missing the crotch. It was later confirmed that two locals who had joined the ANP had been seized by villagers and badly tortured. What the guardsmen did not know was whether the two unlucky policemen had acted corruptly and were the victims of summary justice. The chamber was destroyed anyway with phosphorus grenades.

Ultimately, Number 3 Company's experience at FOB Keenan revealed the over-stretched nature of the British task force. It was remarkable that this was the single British company conducting 'hearts and minds' operations in the entire task force, as Mackay would have wished it. Every other available company was holding besieged outposts or eventually was drawn into the operation to recapture Musa Qaleh. This was far too little

effort devoted to winning over the population and it represented a terrible imbalance despite Brigadier MacKay's determination to focus on the population rather than on fighting. 50 Headquarters and Support Squadron, Royal Signals, a sub-unit with responsibility for leading the military side of reconstruction, found, like Number 3 Company, that it was 'exceedingly hard' to access funds for Consent Winning Activities or Quick Impact Projects from DfID. Eighteen months after the British deployed to Helmand, what amounted to civilian, bureaucratic obstruction of army efforts to build rather than destroy, were still evident. Elsewhere, the remainder of the 7,000 strong force was variously committed to routine administration; the mammoth task of re-supplying the force; or mentoring the ANA and ANP. The British would ultimately withdraw from the Lower Gereshk Valley and handover responsibility for this area, as we have seen, to the equally stretched Danish battlegroup.[488] By the following summer the valley was aflame again with constant gun battles. All the good work undertaken by Number 3 Company would be undone.

This benign scenario in one corner of Helmand belied the real threats that soldiers still faced elsewhere. In mid-November a patrol from 4/73 Special Observation Post Battery was returning to FOB Price on Highway 1. The patrol, led by a Captain James Ashworth, used a route that necessarily took the small convoy through Gereshk town centre. As the Pinzgauers in which the soldiers were riding negotiated the busy main road a white Toyota Corolla accelerated and clipped the lead vehicle before veering towards the second vehicle in the convoy. The top cover sentry Corporal Lee Wilbor had already spotted the danger and acting instinctively fired one round that wounded the suicide bomber. The second vehicle commanded by Battery Sergeant Major Paul Hodgson barely had time to open fire before the car exploded between the two Pinzgauers. Remarkably the soldiers walked away from the experience with nothing worse than burst brakes and shattered windscreens. An unfortunate Afghan motorcyclist who happened to be passing by was not so lucky and was killed instantly.

Elsewhere, the poorly resourced nature of British operations in southern Afghanistan, eighteen months after the initial deployment, could not be hidden. Some units were simply forced to improvise as they went along. The experience of B Company of the Royal Welsh was typical. The entire battalion had initially been ear-marked for operations with 52 Infantry Brigade in Afghanistan. At short notice this posting was changed and the battalion was ordered to prepare for operations in Iraq. At even shorter notice (with the commanding officer already in Iraq conducting his reconnaissance) this decision was

reversed again and it was decided to send just one company to Iraq and a second to Afghanistan. The root of the problem, as ever, was the debilitating under-manning of the chopped infantry regiments. Over this period, every single infantry regiment that survived the culling of Future Army Structures was routinely undermanned by as much as a company. This created an impossible headache for planners trying to meet commitments in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The reasons for this precipitous decline in infantry manpower were complex, but it seems not unreasonable to speculate that the perceived assault on regimental identities by the government-imposed cuts, coupled with the unpopular war in Basra, encouraged many soldiers to vote with their feet.

Given the uncertainty of their final destination, B Company had little time to prepare adequately before being deployed to Afghanistan. The plan was that the company would form a new theatre reserve for the entire ISAF command in south-west Afghanistan, and be based at Kandahar. Once in theatre however the company discovered that no resources had been allocated for the company to fulfil this new role, and everything the company needed to go to war was sitting in Camp Bastion. Eventually the company was allocated a batch of spare Land Rover Snatch vehicles. Due to the lack of helicopters, numerous operations were abruptly cancelled. Poor communications exacerbated their difficulties. In some instances, the company headed off on an operation, only to discover that a different set of orders had arrived, too late. Remarkably, the Welshmen saw out the entire tour without any ECM (Electronic Counter-Measures) to defeat IEDs. Despite these unsatisfactory conditions the soldiers managed to mount a number of effective operations and returned home without suffering any fatalities. But this was a portrait of a task force held together with black masking tape and bungee cords; an army fire-fighting with scant resources, not an army equipped to do its job.

By the time 52 Infantry Brigade approached the mid-way point of its tour it was evident the Taliban had effectively stalemated British forces in the south in Garmsir and in the north at Kajaki. Sangin and Now Zad remained relatively quiescent compared to earlier levels of fighting. Musa Qaleh had become a safe haven for assorted drug barons and Taliban, and it was clear that the town would have to be recaptured. Despite this, the brigade felt that by pursuing a measured counter-insurgency strategy (COIN rather than ‘Hi-COIN’, which amounted to open fighting), some rewards were being reaped. The mentoring of the ANA was progressing, a process that would culminate during the operation to retake Musa Qaleh. The ‘footprints’ inherited from 12 Mechanised Brigade had been retained and 36 Engineer Regiment had added a further four patrol bases as well as numerous checkpoints. The headquarters set-up had been retained and expanded. The

Lashkar Gah PRT was now crammed with military and civilian personnel in dwindling and limited real estate. The problem of IEDs was worrisome but not overwhelming. In the summer of 2006, the 3 Para battlegroup had encountered 80 IEDs. The commandos that followed them dealt with 137 such devices. 12 Mechanised Brigade encountered 344 and 52 Infantry Brigade would encounter even more. All this significantly increased the workload on the 60-odd strong Joint Force Explosive Ordnance Disposal (JFEOD) group, which included only one Improvised Explosive Device Disposal (IEDD) Team, as well as a High Risk Search Team and Conventional Munitions Disposal Team. Every combat fatality incurred by 52 Infantry Brigade would be caused by an IED – the only brigade to suffer this experience. For some, this single statistic was proof the Taliban had switched tactics from conventional stand-off to 'asymmetric warfare'. This was a simplification of a more complicated picture. The widespread use of IEDs was always going to increase as bomb-making skills spread. And the Taliban never stopped ambushing or engaging in gun battles with British forces, even after the IED became the principal weapon in their armoury.

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Intelligence – always the capstone in counter-insurgency – was slowly beginning to improve although serious deficiencies remained. Mackay had urged every soldier to see himself as an intelligence gatherer but the British were still a long way off gaining a comprehensive understanding of their patch of Afghanistan. One of the most effective means of achieving this was by using commercially available short and long wave radio receivers, or ICOM scanners. These were proving a ready way of intercepting insurgent communications. The insurgents knew full well their conversations were being listened into and often traded insults with the Afghan interpreters working for the British. Cannier and more disciplined commanders enforced radio silence, but the average insurgent foot soldier was a compulsive talker. These intercepts provided information at the tactical level. At the operational level, better information was beginning to flow through various means, including the cultivation of informers. By definition, setting up informer networks takes time but the British had some experience of this art from their long campaign in Northern Ireland. The Forward Research Units (FRUs) of this latter campaign were re-invented in Helmand under another innocuous military acronym to disguise their purpose. Another government department also opened an office in south-west Afghanistan and the British special force contingent, originally known as Task Force 42 (the designator number would change over the course of the war), acted as a conduit for 'actionable intelligence'. Often the best sources were the Afghan soldiers themselves. The British

were constantly surprised by how quickly the indigenous soldiers spotted ‘an absence of the normal and the presence of the abnormal’, which usually signalled impending trouble. To most British soldiers, Afghans were largely indistinguishable. The ANA, naturally, could straightaway detect an out-of-place regional accent, or the typical features that distinguished a Pashtun from a Tajik, or an Uzbek.

Keeping this expanding force supplied, watered and fed was beginning to prove a gruelling challenge. The 6,000 kilometre air bridge was the quickest route to Helmand but arriving in theatre could still take forty-eight hours and the limited number of available aircraft meant that the bulk of heavy supplies had to be transported by sea. The lead time for an item arriving via Pakistan, on the ship-borne route, was between two to three months, and the land passage remained vulnerable to brigandage and insurgent ambushes.

For the army mechanics of 1 Equipment Support Battalion REME, Helmand was proving a logistic nightmare. Conventional army doctrine espoused a ‘forward repair’ policy with the deployment of Light Aid Detachments or LADs with sub-units. In Helmand this proved wholly unfeasible and the doctrine had to be turned on its head. Instead a ‘hub and spoke’ scheme had to be adopted with casualty vehicles recovered back to Camp Bastion rather than repaired at the forward bases.

However, this is where the problems started. No bespoke vehicle repair facilities had been planned or built for Operation Herrick. The IT infrastructure was inadequate complicating every task, from ordering spares to maintaining repair rosters. Publications pertaining to new equipment or vehicles were not available. Vehicle breakdowns were so frequent that an impossible demand was placed on the limited numbers of recovery crews driving antiquated Foden vehicles (which themselves broke down and had to be recovered). The situation became so acute (over 600 recoveries had been undertaken by the previous brigade) that additional recovery crews had to be collected in Britain and sent at short notice to Helmand. Because of the lack of spares and the difficulties with ordering spares, a Second World War-style cannibalisation policy had to be adopted. Repair jobs could take two or three times as long to complete because the appropriate spare part had to be first removed from another vehicle. Added to the time needed to recover a vehicle to Bastion and then return it to its crew, this meant that a significant proportion of the army’s vehicle fleet in Helmand was permanently off the road. The vehicles that were on the road were always on the cusp of breaking down again. When the task force undertook the operation to re-capture Musa Qaleh in December that year, a quarter of its trucks broke down. In the Crimean War, Sir John Burgoyne had lamented ‘nine-tenths of the evils of

the army were attributable to the want of transport'. A century and a half later, a British expeditionary force was once again labouring with inadequate vehicles, vehicles so old they were falling apart, and a maintenance system unfit for purpose. These frustrations were publicly voiced by the brigade's Deputy Chief of Staff, Major Nick Haston, who resigned his commission in protest at the shambolic support given to frontline troops. After Butler, Tootal and Pike, he was the fourth officer to resign in a war that was barely a year old. That something was clearly wrong with the way in which the government was supporting the army could hardly be hidden.

The poor state of the road fleet placed great demands on air resupply. In 2007, there were over 12,000 tactical airlift sorties and more than 500 air drops.[489] The workhorses of this effort were the RAF's C-130Js that conducted low altitude night missions to re-supply forward operating bases using an air dropped container delivery system. Between May and December 2007, crews delivered nearly 1000 containers with 800 tons of food, water, ammunition, fuel, generators and even power plants for broken down vehicles. Without these air drops the tempo of operations could not have been sustained because there were insufficient helicopters to service the requirement for cargo lift.

The lack of helicopters was causing not only military friction but also a political storm. By December 2007, the pressure on the Labour government to address this very public issue reached a crisis point. One week before Christmas, Defence Secretary Des Browne announced that a £62 million contract had been awarded to convert eight mothballed Chinook Mk 3 into the support helicopter role. These notorious airframes had once been intended as special force helicopters but a procurement wrangle over software with the manufacturer had left them permanently grounded. Now they were finally going to be returned to the air (or at least six of them were because two had already been cannibalized), but this would take several years. In the meantime the task force would have to struggle on with its limited helicopter fleet. The burden on the Joint Helicopter Force (JHF) continued to rise over this period. Between May 2007 and the following summer, the number of passengers lifted jumped from 4,377 to 31,824.[490] Total freight increased from 779,500 metric tonnes to 1,130,000 metric tonnes. Casualty evacuations also inevitably increased from 375 to 607. The only decrease recorded was in ammunition expenditure. Operation Herrick 6 had marked a sort of apogee in Apache attack sorties – 76 Hellfire and 709 CRV7 rockets had been fired off. Within a year these numbers had halved.[491]

The climax of 52 Infantry Brigade's tour was Operation Mar Karardad ('Snakebite'),

the expulsion of the Taliban from the town of Musa Qaleh. Everybody knew it was coming but nobody could agree on how it should be undertaken. The town elders had run the town for 143 days after the British withdrawal in September 2006, but for the last ten months the Taliban had held the town. Musa Qaleh was not just a military problem (which taken in isolation was straightforward), but rather a political problem with many ramifications. For the Americans, the failed Musa Qaleh deal was still the stone in the shoe in their relationship with the British. Ever suspicious that their ally lacked the will to fight, these fears were being reinforced by events in Iraq where a controversial British withdrawal was unfolding. For the Afghan government that initially welcomed the Musa Qaleh deal and British withdrawal in 2006, Taliban domination of the town was an affront and an embarrassment that had to be reversed. A violent Fallujah-style operation, however, was not favoured. For the British, who always regretted being drawn into Musa Qaleh in the first place, there was a certain frustration that what should have been an example of British subtlety and good sense turned sour after heavy-handed American air strikes in the area provoked a Taliban reaction. Regardless of their previous differences, all three partners knew they had to succeed in Musa Qaleh to restore the credibility of the Afghan government.

52 Infantry Brigade did not arrive in Helmand with a plan to re-take Musa Qaleh. If circumstances had been different the Taliban may have enjoyed another winter in charge of the town and the task would have been handed to 16 Air Assault Brigade, the successor brigade. A plan arose by chance, as a result of an unexpected defection, and it occurred early in the tour. Much like the Coldstream Guards at FOB Keenan, the Right Flank Company of the Scots Guards had been occupying the nearby FOB Arnhem located in the troublesome village of Heyderabad. The Ishaqzai tribesmen in the village loathed ISAF, as much as anything because they were frequently attacked by Task Force 32, an American special force unit based at FOB Robinson.[492] Like their brother guardsmen, the Scots Guards were beginning to win over the suspicious locals when they received orders on 30 October to vacate the base in preparation for a move to Musa Qaleh. The unlikely motive for their withdrawal was to allow the redeployment of the entire company, mounted on Warriors, to Shah Kariz, a small village east of the town, to protect an ex-Taliban commander. The name of this commander was Mullah Abdul Salaam and in the fullness of time he would become a byword for corrupt inefficiency and dashed hopes.

How Mullah Salaam entered the picture encapsulated all the contradictions bedevilling the war in Afghanistan.[493] Northern Helmand was dominated by the Alizai tribe, which as

we have seen was divided into three principal sub-tribes: the Pirzai, Hassanzai, and Khalozai. Abdul Salaam was a Pirzai. Rural settlements tended to be dominated by a single sub-tribe, but in Musa Qala all branches were mixed, creating a fractious environment. Sher Akhundzada, the former governor of Helmand deposed by the British had never stopped intriguing in his Alizai heartlands. The loss of Musa Qaleh – his town – had been a grave loss. Seeing an opportunity to re-take the town by backing a marginalised Taliban commander, Akhundzada, now with a seat in the Afghan legislature, persuaded President Karzai that Mullah Salaam should be championed and encouraged to evict his former Taliban colleagues from Musa Qaleh. Karzai had a sympathetic bent towards Akhundzada whom he felt had been unfairly treated by the British.

In a brilliant piece of detective work by Michael Martin, it appears that an ingenious game of Afghan duplicity was played on Karzai (as well as on a British government department that got involved in the Salaam saga).[494] There were in fact three Mullah Salaams, like a riddle in a story from the *Arabian Nights*. The British government department was backing *the* Mullah Salaam, the Pirzai former ex-Taliban. Karzai, it appears, thought that Mullah Salaam was an Alizai/Khalozai ex-Baghrani commander, whose brother Zakir was in Guantanamo. Zakir, coincidentally was released on the day Musa Qaleh was finally secured, and Martin suggests Karzai may have conflated Zakir's imminent release with his brother switching sides. Sher Akhundzada, it appears, craftily did not advise Karzai that he was confusing two Mullah Salaams. Lastly, there was a third Noorzai Mullah Salaam who had been a Taliban corps commander (he played no role in the plot). Akhundzada would never have agreed to an ex-Baghrani commander taking over his town, but he was content to allow a weaker Pirzai assume the district governorship, as it allowed him to place his men in influential positions.

The plan hatched by the wily Akhundzada was seductive. If it worked, it could be claimed that an Afghan solution had been found for an Afghan problem and there would be little bloodshed. The story may have unfolded thus anyway, but others disagreed. For the ISAF Commander, General Dan McNeill, the whole scheme sounded hare-brained. McNeill may have trusted in God, but after that he trusted in firepower. The Taliban were only going to leave if ISAF kicked them out. For the British Ambassador, Sherard Cowper-Coles, any military operation that threatened to result in heavy casualties was an anathema, so he too backed the Karzai plan. Mackay was not privy to these discussions but he inherited their outcomes. Mullah Salaam would be protected – by British soldiers – until such time as a joint military and political plan could be concocted to recapture Musa

Qaleh, hopefully before the end of the year. For all the niceties and finessing, it was in the end the hawk Dan McNeill who was proved right. Musa Qaleh would only be re-taken with military muscle and the application of violence, and because the British could not or would not do it, this meant American military muscle.

In the normal way, Mackay's staff produced an 'effects schematic' on a wipe board, summarising the plan to retake Musa Qaleh (an effects schematic is essentially a wish-fulfilment sketch which lists various 'effects' a commander intends to visit on his enemy, in a triumph of hope over experience). It is telling that the 'effects' Mackay intended to apply to Musa Qaleh were: 'Divide, Disrupt, Dislocate [in order to] drive a wedge between Tier 1 + Tier 2 EF [Enemy Forces] and allow the tribal elders to restore GoIRA [Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan] authority.'[495] This was pure fantasy. The single 'effect' that counted was 'Destroy the enemy', which Mackay could not countenance. Fortunately, the American paratroopers were entirely comfortable with this idea and delivered the necessary kicking.

The preliminary phase of the operation – the protection of Mullah Salaam – was British-led. It was called Operation Mar Changak and it kicked off on 2 November with the march north of the Right Flank Company of the Scots Guards, accompanied by a squadron of the King's Royal Hussars (KRH) mounted on Mastiffs, one Commando company, and an artillery troop. To further distract the Taliban, the Brigade Reconnaissance Force deployed on 11 November and 'demonstrated' to the west of the Musa Qaleh wadi. The Scots Guards, who were needed elsewhere, were replaced three weeks later by C Squadron of the Household Cavalry (HCR), mounted on Scimitars. The British were not alone in the area as an American Green Beret unit – Task Force 32 – had been operating south of Musa Qaleh, since October. The conflict between regular units and special force units had still not been resolved and 52 Infantry Brigade would experience the frustration of special force raids about which they had not been informed. The British, by contrast, continued to place great faith in 'soft operations', believing that if they ratcheted up the pressure on the Taliban they would not need to engage in heavy fighting or destruction of property. In the Second World War these feints might have been described as 'Chinese attacks'. In the modern era such operations were part of 'shaping the battlefield' - an ambiguous military euphemism that frequently hid muddled thinking.

Part of the problem was the mythology that had grown around the capture of Basra in 2003. Faced with a small, lightly armed but resisting enemy, a British division had been stalled for three weeks on the outskirts of this city. Unlike American forces that had the

resources and confidence to storm urban areas, the British chose to camp on the city perimeter and resorted to pinprick attacks. When Basra finally fell, without resistance, this was credited to the patient British approach. The truth was that Basra fell for two reasons. In the far north, American forces marched 500 kilometres up the Euphrates and Tigris valleys and deposed the Saddam regime. With the national leadership in flight, the Ba'athists in the south simply melted away and resistance in Basra ended. Basra became an open city only *after* the first Baghdad 'thunder run' which provoked Saddam Hussein to go into hiding, a not unimportant point. It was American sweat that delivered the city to the British. The second reason was airpower. A post-conflict, Human Rights Watch study based on Basra hospital records revealed that the overwhelming majority of the 400 odd fatalities – combatant and non-combatant – were caused by air strikes. Equipped with inadequate pods and bombs, the RAF declined to bomb in Basra for fear of killing civilians (some inert concrete bombs were lobbed, that proved ineffectual). Instead, the task fell to American aircraft coordinated by American ANGLICOs, or air-ground controller teams. When it was all added up, the British division had actually killed a very small number of its enemy. Indeed, 1(UK) Armoured Division in 2003 may have been the most harmless British division ever fielded in a war.

This was not the story that was told and the lessons learned from the siege of Basra proved false. A myth developed that Basra had fallen because, in some nebulous way, the British approach had psychologically worn down the Ba'athists. Liddell Hart's 'indirect warfare', squeezed through 'the manoeuvrist approach', had triumphed. Thus were seeds sown for the growth of 'Influence Operations' in the British Army. Over time, this provoked an industrial-level outpouring of some pretty dubious doctrine.

The same scenario was now about to be replayed at Musa Qaleh with the British clinging to the hope that less destructive 'influence operations' might do the trick, and with the Americans, sceptical over the efficacy of this approach, pressing for a direct assault. Operation Mar Changak had only been in progress for a week when 52 Infantry Brigade was warned that a full assault on Musa Qaleh was looking like an increasingly likely possibility. This news apparently caused some dismay to the British who wanted more time to allow their 'softly, softly' approach to work.[496] Ear-marked for the operation would be a unit of American paratroopers, Task Force 1 Fury (the very title probably made Mackay wince), commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Brian Mennes. This would be supported by an Afghan commando kandak, mentored by American special forces. Mennes had a classic, rugged military face with a paratrooper's haircut to match that

straightaway told you he meant business. With a background in special forces his instincts were aggressive rather than pacific. His paratroopers had been in Afghanistan almost a year compared to their British counterparts who had only been in theatre two months. Because the operation would take place in a British area of responsibility, Brigadier Mackay would be in command, but he now found himself in the uncomfortable position that the bulk of his combat power would be American, and these soldiers would be unwilling to answer to British sensitivities.

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British frustrations were matched by American impatience over the whole business of Musa Qaleh. Dan NcNeill had in fact made five offers to recapture Musa Qaleh, all of which had been rejected by President Karzai.[497] Now a half-baked Afghan plan was being proposed and Afghan commanders were boasting they could re-take Musa Qaleh without ISAF assistance. On the ground, Sher Akhundzada was suggesting the matter could be resolved by the Alizai themselves without outside interference. None of this washed with the American general who had become far too canny about his allies. One factor did play in McNeill's favour. Cowper-Coles, another voice against military action was on leave. Without the British Ambassador scotching any attempt to mount an aggressive operation McNeill had free rein to propose a realistic alternative. The Americans – Task Force 1 Fury – would do the heavy lifting, but the Afghans would be allowed to take the credit for the recapture of the town. The British would play a secondary role guarding the flanks of the town, even though a British commander would nominally command the operation. The compromise seemed to satisfy everyone and without a British veto, McNeill acted quickly, presenting the decision as a fait accompli on 18 November to Brigadier Mackay.[498]

When the two coalition partners sat down to agree the details of the plan, disagreements arose straightaway. From Colonel Mennes' point of view, the British simply did not understand the mechanics of executing a large air assault operation.[499] British planners wanted to split his paratroopers, whereas Mennes wanted to abide by one of the cardinal principles of war: concentration of force. The British wanted to approach from the south, the usual route. Mennes wanted to achieve surprise by arriving from an unexpected direction. There was talk of an Afghan lead under Brigadier Mohayadin which Mennes, like his boss, Dan McNeill, did not find credible. And there was British touchiness over American 'heavy metal' blazing Musa Qaleh and reducing it to a pile of ruins. This fear was amplified by a horrified Cowper-Cowles who returned from leave to discover that the operation to re-take Musa Qaleh had been sanctioned in his absence. In a

deliberately planted e-mail, Cowper-Coles indicated that the assault force would refrain from overtly aggressive actions during a forthcoming visit of the new Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, to save any potential embarrassment.[500] This would not be the last time the British ambassador attempted to interfere in military operations in Helmand and it incensed the military staffs.

These disagreements came to a head in the first formal planning group that descended into an open debate between the three 'M's: Mohayadin, Mackay and Mennes. The British had been meticulous in planning the preparatory phases of the operation, as well as in proposing a plan for the follow-on stabilisation phase, but had left wide open the thorny question of how the Taliban were actually going to be defeated. The hope – a naïve hope in Mennes' view – was that the Taliban would somehow be persuaded to leave by the show of force. A veteran of the re-taking of Sangin, Mennes simply did not believe in this vague, British notion of psychological persuasion. Sangin had been re-taken by firepower, not leaflet drops. What really stuck in the maw of the Americans was a British insistence that no large munitions should be used in Musa Qaleh town centre, without prior authorisation from the British General 'Jacko' Page, commander of Regional Command South-West.[501] This was simply unacceptable to Mennes. His men would be taking the risk - because the British were incapable or unwilling to mount the operation - and now the British expected him to follow a set of unrealistic rules of engagement that would increase the risk still further. From Brigadier Mackay's viewpoint what was at stake was his entire philosophy of 'influence operations' and winning over the population. Musa Qaleh could be the experiment that proved his thesis right, if only he could persuade the Americans to embrace his way of thinking.

Not all the British, it may be noted, believed in this policy of restraint. At least one officer thought that the staff officer insisting on a prohibition of large munitions was an 'idiot'.[502] After lengthy and heated debates a template for a plan was agreed. Task Force 1 Fury would recapture Musa Qaleh according to Mennes' plan but the paratroopers would desist from entering the town centre in broad daylight, allowing the Afghans to take the honour. It would require careful stage management but it seemed workable. In fact, Mennes' plan was almost a facsimile of the scheme used by the Soviet Army when it attacked Musa Qaleh in 1983. In this operation, motor rifle troops had advanced from the high ground to the west, crossing the Musa Qaleh wadi before entering the town, while an armoured spearhead led by T-72 tanks assaulted along the same route the Green Howards would follow. The battle lasted one week, before the mujahidin escaped north.

The operation to retake Musa Qaleh – Operation Mar Karardad – began on 2 December with a move by Bravo Company, 40 Commando into blocking positions on the Musa Qaleh wadi, north of Sangin. Prior to this move, 4/73 (Sphinx) Special Observation Post Battery had already set up observation posts over-looking Musa Qaleh. This sub-unit, it was later claimed, would endure the longest desert patrol mounted by the British Army, since the end of the Second World War. The Brigade Reconnaissance Force (BRF) had also deployed to the vicinity of Musa Qaleh. In one incident on 27 November, Acting Sergeant John Cockburn, attached from the Green Howards (2 Yorks), personally charged a Taliban trench, capturing an individual along the way. He was subsequently awarded a Military Cross for his nerve.[503] The intent of the marines' block was to both deceive the Taliban of the true axis of assault and to create a bridgehead for Delta Company, 40 Comamndo and the Right Flank Company, Scots Guards. As predicted, the Taliban responded with rockets, mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. With the bridgehead secure, the Scots Guards motored to Shah Kariz for the next phase of the operation.

The twenty-five kilometre drive north took forty-eight hours across difficult desert terrain. The purpose of this move was to meet up with militiamen who would protect Mullah Salaam for the duration of the operation. This Afghan-side of the operation, in which it seems a British government department had a hand, turned into farce. On 5 November two clapped-out buses escorted by a Czech special force team arrived at the rendezvous point. They were full of disorientated militiamen, many of whom were ex-Taliban, and all of whom seemed to be in a sour mood.[504] The militiamen loaded their weapons and became hostile. An attempt was then made to disarm the men which caused tensions to rise still further. Eventually a peace was brokered and the militiamen were driven to the nearby village of Shah Kariz in British vehicles. Mullah Salaam was either not expecting this protection or was distrustful of the strangers and refused to accept the militiamen. When the convoy arrived he was not even at home and it took a good while to track him down on a mobile phone number, by which time darkness was falling. Back at the 52 Infantry Brigade HQ at Lashkar Gah, Mackay lost his temper with the government liaison officer and the whole business was being described with the impolitic but colourful phrase as a 'cluster fuck'. A wildly unrealistic order was then transmitted to the British ground commander to disarm the fighters and to recover $64,000 which they were carrying. He wisely declined to follow this order and eventually the militiamen found their way back down south. Mennes had been right – if the matter had been left to the Afghans, Musa Qaleh would have remained in Taliban hands.

Even as this drama was unfolding, the second element of the British force, led by the Commanding Officer of HCR, Ed Smyth-Osbourne, began its move from Assembly Area Apollo to blocking positions at Objective Vulcan near a village called Yatimchay, about seven kilometres south of Musa Qaleh. This force comprised C Squadron HCR, B Squadron KRH, the reconnaissance platoon of the Coldstream Guards, and an Afghan company. They would later be joined by the Right Flank Company of the Scots Guards who surrendered the pointless task of protecting Mullah Salaam. It was a measure of British reticence to get involved in fighting that this potent force of tracked and wheeled vehicles - Scimitars, Warriors, Mastiffs - was kept out of danger and relegated to acting as a block. If Smyth-Osborne's task force had simply carried on driving north into Musa Qaleh, another twenty minute drive, supported by the marines, it is difficult to see how the Taliban could have stopped him. The Taliban had nothing in their armoury that could penetrate the sides of the Mastiffs or Warriors, and the firepower these vehicles enjoyed was overwhelming. The surprise and boldness of the move could have been the decisive factor. There was the ever-present threat of IEDs, but there were many side routes into Musa Qaleh, not just the main north-south track and these were wide open.

It was not that the British lacked pluck or fight at the troop or platoon level. When a Mastiff carrying the squadron leader of the KRH struck an IED, Corporal Richard Street, a Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineer commanding a Foden recovery truck, braved Taliban fire and hitched the stricken vehicle. The Foden that Corporal Street commanded was not only an obsolete truck-it was also a completely unprotected vehicle. The convoy then found its way barred by a bridge that would almost certainly have collapsed under the weight of the vehicles. Left with no choice but to turn back Corporal Street drove the battered truck, now with the wheels shot out, back through the ambush using one hand to steer and firing a pistol out the window with his free hand. In the understated language of official citations he was judged to have manifested 'a conspicuous display of gallantry' and was awarded a Military Cross.[505]

Far to the west of the HCR battlegroup the third British force – a composite task force of Afghan soldiers mentored by B and C Companies of the Green Howards (2 Yorks), led by the BRF, began the long desert journey from Camp Bastion to the western edge of Musa Qaleh. In total, the convoy stretched for over sixteen kilometres and was impossible to hide. The purpose of this force was act as a second diversion and then to enter the town, once it had been cleared by the American paratroopers. Ironically, the Green Howards battlegroup – which was also deliberately kept away from the fighting - would suffer the

most British casualties through mine strikes. An element of this force, together with a team of Green Berets and two companies of ANA, first diverted north-west and drove to the town of Now Zad. After linking up with the resident Estonian company, the composite force set about provoking a Taliban response, another diversion designed to keep the insurgents on the back foot across northern Helmand.

As Major Barrie Terry commanding the British contingent described, they soon got what they came for:

'We commenced our advance to contact towards the Green Zone, knowing that some one hundred Taleban were reportedly in the area. Just one hundred metres short of their locations, the Taleban announced their presence in characteristic form and a five hour fire-fight ensued. Artillery, mortars and Close Air Support (CAS) were all used to combat the Taleban and eventually the ISAF and ANA forces were able to extract, leaving behind them many enemy dead. The convoy left Now Zad on 6th December and after conducting a feint to confuse the enemy, moved to link up with the remainder of 2 YORKS in the desert approximately ten kilometres south of Musa Qualeh [sic]. On route, the convoy was heavily ambushed and again CAS was to come to our aid by dropping bombs and strafing several enemy positions with 30mm cannons.'[506]

This upbeat account did not wholly match the experience of some of the participants. One thought that what they were doing was 'absolutely fucking barking'.[507] The insurgents were so well camouflaged the British struggled to spot them. When air support and artillery was called the firing intensified rather than diminished and the company group found itself having to conduct a withdrawal under fire. After quitting the town, gunmen ambushed the company again, the ANA panicked, and two Dutch F-16s sent to rescue the force refused to drop bombs. Overall, the value of these deliberate diversions – a standard ISAF tactic – may have been over-played. They made no difference to the outcome in Musa Qaleh, which militarily was never in doubt, and every patrol base in the Upper Sangin Valley found itself under attack anyway during Operation Mar Karardad, which was the standard Taliban response to any aggression by ISAF forces.

D-Day was set for the 7 November. Alongside the roughly 4,000 strong ground force an armada of aircraft had been assembled to support the assault, including every strike platform available to American forces in Afghanistan: B-1B bombers, F-16s, F-18s, A-10s, AC-130 gunships and AH-64 Apaches. The latter two would prove the most effective killers. This aerial force was supported by American surveillance assets that included Predator and Reaper UAVs, an RC-135 Rivet Joint collecting signals intelligence and an

E-8C JSTARS collecting imagery intelligence. An American E-3 Sentry AWACs aircraft coordinated all the aircraft movements over the tight airspace. The British contribution was meagre: a single Nimrod MR2 and Harrier GR.9. The latter followed strict British rules of engagement and apparently never engaged the enemy.

The British side of the operation took an unfortunate turn almost straightaway, albeit as a result of the actions of some Green Berets. Ordered to advance on a village called Deh Zohr e Sofla, about five kilometres south-west of Musa Qaleh, the ANA soldiers mentored by the Green Howards came under heavy fire. This village would in fact never be tamed and remained hostile to the British for the rest of the war. As happened at Now Zad, the ANA panicked, exacerbating control of the situation. When a small convoy of vehicles carrying refugees tried to flee the village the attached Green Berets opened fire killing seven civilians including women and children. One of the crashed cars disgorged two dead children from the boot.[508] British soldiers, it seems, had also joined in the shooting. What followed shamed the soldiers. Promised a helicopter, the wounded and frightened civilians were persuaded to wait rather than attempt the drive to Gereshk hospital. Four hours later, during which time one of the wounded civilians had died, and after it became obvious that no helicopter was going to be despatched to evacuate the family, they were allowed to leave. At least at Deh Zohr e Sofla, Mackay's hopes that the British would be able to win 'hearts and minds' were completely dashed.

The reason why no helicopter was available lay overhead. Every available helicopter had already been bagged to support the air assault of Task Force 1 Fury. Even this armada of twenty-one helicopters only included twelve Chinooks – the largest and most useful of the transport helicopters - crewed by a mix of British, Dutch and American pilots.[509] The insufficiency of helicopters was again plaguing coalition operations.

If the British had reason to feel demoralised by the start of Operation Mar Karardad, matters were even worse on the American side. The original plan had envisaged landing the entire force in Wuch Mandah, a wadi four kilometres north-west of Musa Qaleh. This was protected from view of the town by a spur of ground. To the dismay of the British, immediately before landing the paratroopers, an inferno of air and artillery firepower would be unleashed on thirty-four targets – the standard Vietnam-era tactic of 'prepping' the battlefield.[510] This depended, of course, on someone with hostile intent actually being at the nominated targets. Typically, the intelligence had been greatly exaggerated (one of the RAF helicopter pilots remembered being assured they were all probably going to die). As the airborne armada circled, it became clear there was no enemy. This created a

dilemma that the American fire planners could not bypass. The carefully worked-out fire plan needed an enemy. The American pilots could not destroy compounds gratuitously even by their own rules of engagement. As the minutes passed and fuel began to run low it became apparent that the fire plan would have to be abandoned (it was not entirely as some guns opened fire anyway). Without a fire plan, Colonel Mennes switched to landing the entire force in the Arhad Mandah, another wadi a further four kilometres away from Musa Qaleh. It would mean a longer and harder approach march for his paratroopers and all surprise would be lost. As if to add insult to injury the paratroopers landed in full view of the British BRF, which had simply driven to the same spot.

The paratroopers that landed in Arhad Mandah now faced a stiff trek to their lines of departure. Laden with ammunition and stumbling over rocky undulating ground they only finally arrived on the outskirts of Musa Qaleh at day break on 8 December. The key feature that dominated the town was the Roshan Tower, the telecommunications mast set on a 1,089 metre bluff three kilometres north-west of the town that offered panoramic views of the entire area. Amazingly, there was no Taliban presence on this hill which the paratrooper A Company swiftly occupied, followed by the battalion tactical headquarters. For the rest of the battle, Colonel Mennes, and later Brigadier Mackay, would follow events on the ground from this eyrie, much like 19th century commanders surveying a battlefield through a spyglass. The seizure of the Roshan tower in effect determined the outcome of the battle before a single shot had been fired. There was only one foot path to the top of the Roshan Tower (from the south-west) and anyone attempting to climb the hill faced cliff faces on three sides. While A Company settled on their commanding height, B and C Companies began a pincer movement on the town, advancing from the north and south respectively. C Company was the first to make contact just after dawn and B Company soon followed. For the remainder of the day all three companies found themselves tied down in a slugging match against a nearly invisible enemy and they struggled to make any progress. To A Company’s surprise a suicidal attempt was made by a group of locals to attack the telecommunications mast. This was easily repelled but then the paratroopers took casualties when they decided the abandon the safety of the hill and chase down gunmen that had got away. Some of the fighting that day was at very close quarters and Task Force 1 Fury was lucky to escape with so few casualties. By the evening everyone was exhausted having barely slept in the previous twenty-four hours, and Mennes called a halt to any further offensive actions.

At daybreak on 9 December the round of fighting resumed. Despite lavish artillery and

air support offered to the paratroopers, insurgent resolve seemed undiminished. The stack of aerial surveillance platforms flying over the battlefield was also struggling to clearly identify enemy positions. A typical engagement would see an Apache helicopter ‘talked on’ to a suspected enemy machine gun position, only to find within minutes of the departure of the gunship that the machine gun had not been destroyed. This was partly because the insurgents had dug trenches or were using deep ditches to evade the attacks, but also because an enormous amount of prophylactic fire was being wasted against phantom targets. An Apache that chanced its luck one too many times was eventually hit wounding the gunner. By the end of the day, during which there was a lull in the fighting to undertake an ammunition resupply, the paratroopers had only been able to make yards against their determined opponents. As night fell Mennes was joined by Brigadier Mackay whose presence so far forward at the tactical headquarters caused some irritation. Why the British brigade headquarters needed to co-locate itself alongside the American headquarters, given that all the support fire was being co-ordinated by American staff officers, was a question that Mennes struggled to answer. To the Americans it felt like snooping and interference in what was an all-American battle. Mennes may have validly posed the question why forty odd British armoured vehicles were parked just south of the town, and not lending him support.

The luck of the Taliban was always going to run out eventually given the huge odds stacked against them and the turning point seemed to come in the evening of 9 December. [511] A Predator spotted a Taliban heavy machine gun being wheeled away in the dark and the crew was successfully attacked by a strike aircraft. One of the survivors then led the watching UAV to a building which was confirmed to be the source of a large number of insurgent radio transmissions. A second, 2,000 pound bomb completely flattened this building. This strike seemed to flush out more fighters. Unbeknown to the Taliban, two AC-130 Spectre gunships were circling overhead viewing the entire spectacle. It became a turkey shoot. By the end of the engagement the crews reckoned they had either killed or wounded fifty insurgents. For the Taliban on the ground the entire experience must have been very demoralising. The sense that there was nowhere to hide in the darkness from these monstrous aircraft only added to their demoralisation. Mennes now ordered his companies to press forward in the dark exploiting the battering that had been wreaked by the gunships. Facing much lighter resistance the paratroopers closed on the edge of the town centre by dawn on 10 December.

What should have followed on the morning of 10 December was a rapid investment of

the town centre. But for the sluggishness of the British and their ANA charges this is what would have happened. Instead a whole 24 hours passed while the British re-organised their forces which - with the exception of the BRF - had not taken part in the fight for Musa Qaleh. The HCR battlegroup had originally been deployed to a southern blocking position to intercept any ‘squirters’ heading south. Radio intercepts indicated that some Taliban, possibly field commanders, had indeed evaded south. None of these were captured. The battlegroup was now ordered to redeploy to the east of the town where it was suspected more Taliban were fleeing. By the time the battlegroup arrived in its new blocking position the Taliban that had chosen to flee along the eastern route had long disappeared in the direction of Kajaki. In the end the British failed to take a single prisoner. To the west, the Green Howards battlegroup spent the entire day preparing to move with the ANA companies, but did not actually move a foot forward.

On the morning of 11 December the Green Howards battlegroup and ANA finally marched to Musa Qaleh. They arrived at the southern outskirts of the town at about lunch time and began to probe forward with C Company clearing the western half of the town, and B Company clearing the eastern side. Some of the ANA soldiers profited from this leisurely march by helping themselves to marijuana plants.[512] The distance they had to cover to the town centre – a roundabout marked by a minaret – was a fifteen minute walk but a chronic British risk aversion coupled with an exaggerated sense of the Taliban threat meant that by sunset they had only advanced about half this distance or about 500 metres in four hours. In the entire afternoon nobody saw any insurgents, or indeed any civilians. The place was deserted. The soldiers could have simply strolled to the centre with hands in their pockets. Instead, in what was beginning to resemble a tedious British health and safety exercise, they stopped short and bedded down for the night in deserted buildings. Musa Qaleh would have to wait yet another day before it was officially liberated (which did not stop Kabul announcing the recapture anyway).

Finally, on the morning of 12 December, forty-eight hours after the American paratroopers had sent the Taliban packing, Musa Qaleh was ‘liberated’. To commemorate the event a photograph was taken of Brigadier Mohayadin, the ANA commander, raising a triumphant fist in front of Musa Qaleh’s only noteworthy building – the ornate minaret on the roundabout. Unfortunately a bomb had chipped off a corner of the minaret so that it now leant at an angle, and was only held up by rickety wooden scaffolding. Corporal Chris Hargreaves, the photographer who took the all-important photograph, inclined his camera to the left, both adding drama to the composition and artfully disguising the lean in

the minaret. The brigadier would not be remembered as the officer who shook his fist in front of a toppling tower.

In the succeeding days, house searches began to reveal old weapon caches, bomb factories and stashes of opium. Three drug laboratories were found and about 2,000 kilograms of opium, a fraction of Musa Qaleh's output in the last ten months when it had been free of government control. Somehow these figures then became wildly inflated so that within days reports of sixty opium laboratories and $500 million's worth of opium were being bandied about, or more than all of Helmand's farmers made in a good year. The spin and counter-spin then went into over-drive as a Chinook's worth of reporters flown in three days after Brigadier Mohayadin raised the Afghan flag managed to find some unhelpfully honest locals who were more than forthcoming in relating to the media circus just how many of their innocent relatives had been killed in the fighting. British touchiness over stories of collateral damage and the deaths of civilians probably meant less to the locals who seemed used to the violence and had begun to return in droves once the shooting stopped. A short-lived experiment under Taliban rule had suited some, and others had simply kept a low profile. Now there were new rulers in town and it was time to open up the bazaar stores again. The practical business of making a living trumped other concerns.

Ultimately, views on the recapture of Musa Qaleh depended on which perspective you chose to view the operation from. For Brigadier Mackay, Musa Qaleh had the character of an emotional crusade. He was desperate to show that there was another way of conducting counter-insurgency operations that did not involve destroying the village in order to save it. The decisive actions would not be the military operation but what followed: the rebuilding of the town and its institutions, such as they existed. He was right, of course, but the Americans also understood this - it was a pot of $13 million (all American funds) that was going to reconstruct Musa Qaleh. For Karzai, living in the bubble of Kabul, Musa Qaleh was a vindication of his policy to support loyal tribesmen who had turned against the Taliban. It mattered not that the loyal tribesman in question, Mullah Salaam, was a hopeless inept whom the British would have to mollycoddle and eventually bypass in order to get anything done in Musa Qaleh. The errant Mullah did not actually show up in the town until almost two weeks after its capture. Whitehall, also out of touch with the realities on the ground, lauded this success story which had fortuitously coincided with the Prime Minister's visit to Afghanistan. The British Ambassador's fears of a public relations disaster never materialised. For Colonel Mennes and his paratroopers, now nearing the end of their arduous tour, the retaking of Musa Qaleh was just another operation which they executed

with customary efficiency. The real victor was Sher Akhundzada who now found the path clear to re-assert his authority over the district.

In the short term, it was easy to be cynical about Operation Mar Karardad. The reconstruction of the town, led by the grandly named but unfortunately incompetent British Musa Qaleh Planning Group, was faltering at best. The town mosque destroyed in the fighting was still not rebuilt three years later when the British left (US marines would eventually rebuild the mosque and the town minaret) The main bazaar road was laid with tarmac and six months later was full of pot holes again. A school was opened and some medical assistance was offered but these were token gestures. A World Food Program convoy (Operation Mar Sarek), despatched in February, was more about headlines than real needs. Nobody in Musa Qaleh was starving. Mostly the town picked itself up by its own efforts, and crucially because the fighting ended. This was Mackay's legacy and it was not an unimportant one. In time, the Taliban returned but now they were kept away from the town. A ring of small patrol bases would sprout around the perimeter of Musa Qaleh creating an effective security bubble. These acted as magnets for the insurgents and kept the fighting away from the town centre. The approach needed patience and whatever other faults the British had, a lack of patience was not one of them. Unlike Sangin, the British would be able to look back on Musa Qaleh, the town that had caused them so many problems in the summer of 2006, and claim that some progress towards pacification had been made. This achievement was set by Brigadier Mackay and 52 Infantry Brigade and it was one of the substantial successes of the British war in Helmand Province.

Much like 3 Commando Brigade in the preceding winter, 52 Infantry Brigade significantly stepped up its operations in the second half of the tour. In the former case this had been catalysed by a sense that something had to be done to push back insurgents encroaching on the handful of British bases. In the latter case, the re-taking of Musa Qaleh seemed to awaken the insurgency from its traditional winter hibernation. It was ironic that both brigadiers, Thomas and Mackay, who strongly espoused calming the situation and avoiding confrontation, ended up swinging the British club at the Taliban.

This upswing in operations coincided with a period of foul weather which severely tested both men and equipment. Christmas had barely been celebrated (21,000 sacks of mail, weighing over 170 tonnes, were sent to Afghanistan that year) before the task force found itself in action again.[513] Lieutenant Colonel Waters recorded the effect this had on the troops who faced prolonged periods exposed to the elements:

'A number of people have noted that the wind, rain and most particularly, the mud

have made Southern Helmand rather more like the infamous training grounds of Brecon than anyone thought. Bouts of torrential rain and the resultant mud made patrolling decidedly tricky. The rain was quickly followed by a prolonged cold snap which has seen night time temperatures down to minus 12. Operating in cold weather is one thing but when there is nowhere at all with significant heating to warm up at the end of the day is does make for quite robust soldiering.'[514]

From 1 January to 4 February, 40 Commando based at Sangin mounted Operation Ghartse Spike, a series of company-level operations designed to disrupt insurgent groups that had filtered south from Musa Qaleh towards Sangin. This was followed by Operation Mar Kheshta ('Snake Brick') on 8 February which involved soldiers from the Scots Guards, the KRH, and a troop of 105mm Light Guns from 4 Regiment Royal Artillery. To ensure 'an Afghan face' to the operation, the strike itself, in a village called Mosulmani, fifteen kilometres north of Sangin, would be conducted by an Afghan kandak mentored by British soldiers. As well as disrupting an insurgent group it was hoped to seize an opium laboratory. In this respect, Operation Mar Kheshta marked a small milestone because it was the first, deliberate counter-narcotics operation mounted by the British since their arrival in Helmand.

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The force deployed from its patrol bases and took up positions by nightfall east of Mosulmani, in the desert. The Right Flank Company of the Scots Guards established a screen while B Squadron KRH transported the Afghan soldiers to their lines of departure in Mastiffs. At dawn the following day, the Afghan soldiers began their advance towards the target compounds. It was not long before locals spotted the troops and responded with small arms fire and volleys of RPGs. As the Warriors presented the most obvious and tempting targets, the Scots Guards found themselves receiving the brunt of the fire. This was a mistake on the part of the gunmen as these APCs had recently been fitted with new French thermal imaging sights that offered significant improvements in target acquisition, especially at the longer ranges. Soon the guardsmen were returning accurate fire with 30mm cannon, against which the enemy had no riposte. Overhead, two Dutch F-16s and an American Apache provided additional cover and posed an even greater threat to anyone unwary enough to break cover. Faced with this overwhelming firepower the gunmen fled allowing the Afghan kandak to secure the suspect area without further resistance. The intelligence had proved accurate. In addition to finding a large processing plant, the soldiers impounded a tonne of raw opium, about 1,000 kilograms of precursor chemicals

(mainly acetic anhydride), and about twenty kilograms of heroin powder. If the raid had been conducted a month later, after the opium poppy harvest, the haul would almost certainly have been much larger, but at least it was a start. Despite the self-congratulation that followed Operation Mar Kheshta, the scale of the counter-narcotics task facing the British task force remained completely undiminished. The drugs haul at Mosulmani represented much less than one per cent of Afghanistan's total opium production that year. There was an awful long way to go before the narcotics traffickers were going to feel the pinch.

From 16 – 26 February the task force mounted Operation Mar Taqeeb aimed at disrupting Taliban that had migrated into the Upper Sangin Valley. This was followed by a combined Anglo-Danish operation just north of Gereshk that resulted in the building of a new base – FOB Armadillo – that would become a permanent Danish company outpost. The HCR battlegroup in the meantime mounted Operation Mar Jaang (10 – 14 March) which sought to push back Taliban that had re-infiltrated into the Musa Qaleh wadi, south of the town. The last such mission was Operation Gharste Dagger, mounted from 18 – 31 March, which also involved B Company of 40 Commando. The target in this case was the village of Sapwan Kala, just north of Sangin where a group of Taliban had re-grouped and were protecting a suspected drugs laboratory. Marching in darkness, the marines arrived at the village at dawn and discovered over a tonne of morphine base – the precursor of heroin – as well as weapons, identity cards and evidence of financial transactions, some of which were in English.

With all eyes focussed on Musa Qaleh and northern Helmand it was easy to forget that to the north and south the British task force was engaged in almost daily gun battles with insurgents. For the marines at Kajaki, like their predecessors on operation Herrick 5, the daily routine involved patrolling, sniping, and the occasional raid. On occasions - as happened during a raid on the village of Khevelabad in early November - matters could go horribly wrong. Caught in an ambush, four marines were wounded. Under fire it took the efforts of the entire company and a supporting F-15 that dropped a 2,000 pound bomb, to evacuate the casualties.[515] By the end of the day the marines had fired off almost 20,000 rounds and launched three Javelin missiles.[516] For all this expenditure of ammunition, nothing changed on the frontline.

On other occasions, a certain improvisation and almost reckless bravery coloured the raids. Determined to clear old, Russian trenches on Shrine Hill Charlie Company set off with a newly-arrived and inexperienced bomb disposal officer, a splendidly named Major

Ian Scattergood. The first bomb was found at the base of the ridge. Scattergood cleared this by hand. Arriving at the top of the ridge he came under fire but continued to clear the trenches, finding and dismantling a second bomb attached to a rocket. Scattergood was duly awarded a Military Cross for this action.

At the other end of Helmand, in the south, Garmsir was proving one of the most violent districts in Helmand, as well as the most beleaguered. Captain Yambahadur Rana, the officer commanding B Company at FOB Delhi in Darvishan, recalled a typical day starting and ending with mortar fire:

'It is normal to wake up in the morning firing [a] few mortar rounds on to the heads of infiltrated Taliban. This goes on; on and off almost all day before it gets dark and nights are generally quiet. Within a month they had a troops in contact (TIC) almost every day.'[517]

As the Gurkhas were naturally gifted marksmen, real pride was experienced when one of the soldiers managed to hit the elusive enemy with a single well aimed shot:

'Sgt Bhaktabahadur Sherchan killed one Taleban at approx 250 metres in one shot who was recovered by Afghani National Police. He was shot right on the chest. After all Sgt Bhakta is an Army 100 shot. Well done!'[518]

Mostly, the enemy remained shadowy and elusive although B Company reckoned they probably killed about forty Taliban who had taken their chances attacking the base. The toughness of these Nepalese mountain men was also evident. In one day long gun battle at Balaklava Checkpoint at the eastern end of the town, Private Laldhoj Gurung was struck by a bullet that somehow missed his Osprey body armour and entered his right chest. Oblivious to the pain he continued to fight on. His section commander only appreciated the seriousness of his wound when he saw the blood stained body armour. The hardy Private Gurung was eventually evacuated and would fully recover from his wound.

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While B Company was slugging it out in Garmsir, the two sister companies were experiencing a very different tour as the regional reserve based in Kandahar. This placed them under the multi-national chain of command of the Regional Command (South) commander – a Canadian general – rather than under Brigadier Mackay in Helmand. The operations they undertook were essentially intelligence-led raids that sometimes ended in success but mostly ended in frustration. All were coalition operations, a novel experience for a Gurkha battalion drawn from its insular base in Brunei. As the majority of these

missions were undertaken in the mountainous belt to the north of the city, the Gurkhas experienced extreme climatic conditions throughout this period. One of the biggest challenges they faced was the unreliability of the Bowman radios, which provoked angry comments from the commanding officer. The VHF radios experienced frequent fill dropouts and manifested poor range. Eventually the Gurkhas adopted Second World-War style drills and hand signals to overcome these difficulties. As much as anything the tour became a human and equipment endurance test.

Newly arrived in theatre, A Company was first deployed on Operation Palk Wahel in support of the operation to clear insurgents from the village of Zumbelay, north-east of Gereshk. This took place in the last week of September and the heavy summer of fighting had clearly taken its toll as the Gurkhas only experienced one gun battle in the entire two weeks they spent in the Green Zone.

After an interlude, A and C Companies then took part in a three week long, Dutch-led mission called Operation Spin Ghar which was mounted at the end of October. The objective of the operation was to assault and destroy a reported Taliban redoubt 200 kilometres north of Kandahar in an area known as Baluchi Valley. This narrow gorge was about ten kilometres long and surrounded by mountains that rose 6,500 feet above the valley floor. The helicopter lift involved five Chinooks, four Apaches, two Black Hawks and two Lynx, drawn from the British, Dutch and American fleets. C Company was inserted first, at night, in Chinooks and was quickly engaged by gunmen. A Company followed half an hour later in the second lift but by the time it arrived the gunmen had escaped into the surrounding mountains. The entire lift took three hours to complete. In daylight, the Gurkhas found numerous bunkers and some abandoned weapons which were destroyed. After spending three days searching the area the Gurkhas were withdrawn in preparation for a second assault in the valley. The next phase of Operation Spin Ghar proved largely fruitless. The soldiers spent ten days patrolling the upper reaches of the valley before extending their search to the south but found nothing of significance. They were then re-tasked to search an area to the west called Def Rafshan where initial local resistance quickly evaporated. For this part of the operation the Gurkhas were joined by A Company of 1 Royal Welsh, the company that had been posted at short notice to bolster the theatre reserve force. With the lack of enemy there was a certain holiday atmosphere about the whole business. One Gurkha chiefly remembered the experience because of the habits of the Dutch chefs rather than the threat of Taliban insurgents:

‘A special mention must go to a few people… the Dutch chefs who constantly sent out

frozen food for the boys to eat. I now feel there will be a new Gurkha tradition of putting cold meat down your underpants for defrosting before making it into a sandwich.'[519]

Before Christmas the two companies would take part in four further missions – one in Helmand and the remainder in Kandahar province. Operation Breshna, the first mission, was conducted in support of an American special force detachment – Task Force 32 – which was given the task of clearing an area called Chenartu Valley. Like Operation Spin Ghar it turned into physically gruelling and mostly pointless flog. Chenartu Valley had been cleared every year since 2005 when Task Force Bayonet first ventured into Taliban strongholds at Ordobagh, Zamto Kalay and El Bak. As soon as American forces left, the insurgents simply returned to the villages.[520] C Company infiltrated by night on foot and secured a helicopter landing site for A Company which followed the next day. Four days were spent searching the valley before the operation was abandoned. Nothing was found.

Immediately following this operation, A Company was redeployed to Helmand to support 40 Commando as the southern block in the operation to re-take Musa Qaleh. C Company in the meantime took part in two Canadian-led operations to clear insurgents from Panjwai district west of Kandahar. The orchard groves and vineyards of Panjwai had been an artificial creation of an American dam project further north at Lake Dhala, undertaken in the same period as the building of Kajaki Dam in Helmand. One of the idiosyncratic features of the district was large earthen mounds the farmers created to support viticulture. These provided perfect cover for snipers and greatly restricted movement. Following the withdrawal of the Soviet Army, Panjwai along with Zhari became poppy growing districts as farmers sought to restore profitability to their wrecked lands. Perhaps a quarter of a million tribesmen lived in this watershed of the Arghandab Valley. The Russians had deployed entire brigades to subdue the area, without success. The Canadians were now attempting to repeat the exercise with under-strength battalions. Significantly, the Arghandhab Valley was the birthplace the Mullah Omar's Taliban movement.

These operations represented a fresh challenge for the Gurkhas because the Canadian 1st Battalion Royal 22e Régiment (R22e) was an armoured battlegroup equipped with Leopard tanks. Gurkha battalions had not fought alongside tanks since the end of Second World War. The locals had not seen tanks since Soviet T-72s swept the Arghandab Valley in the 1980s. For all parties, the two operations proved violent and loud. Over the course of Operation Dada Shoy, a six hour battle was fought in an area known as Zangabad, which had already been cleared once before in the previous year. In the second mission,

Operation Tereh Toorah, over forty Taliban were reportedly killed after an eight hour battle at a village called Sia Choy.

At the turn of the year the pace of operations picked up once again. The two companies deployed on Operation Sohil Laram 1, a Canadian-led mission that would last four weeks and which took the Gurkhas to the mountain massif that forms the northern border of Kandahar province. Intelligence suggested that this was an area being used by insurgents as a sanctuary to prepare attacks further south. The aim of the operation was to disrupt these mountain refuges. A Company, comprising about 200 men, deployed first in a thirty-five vehicle MOG (Mobile Operations Group). Two days later they were joined by C Company that struck an IED two kilometres short of its rendezvous with A Company. The blast was heard for miles around and bystanders were amazed that the three occupants of the open-top Land Rover WMIK survived, albeit badly injured. Major Leigh Roberts, the vehicle commander, suffered multiple fractures to his legs and ribs and injuries to his thorax. Lance Corporal Netrabahadur Rana, one of the crewmen, lost his left leg as well as suffering a dislocated back. The other crewman, Lance Corporal Tej Ghale suffered severe head injuries. All three men would receive a Canadian Forces Unit Commendation in recognition of their injuries.

On 26 January the now fifty-two strong vehicle convoy set off to its area of operations north of Kandahar city. The area they were exploring was a rocky plateau overlooked by the still snow-capped massif that rises to over 8,000 feet above the city. This had been the scene of Operation Perseverance in the summer that had witnessed pitched battles between Canadian forces and dug-in insurgents. After setting up a desert leaguer, the Gurkhas conducted a stealthy fifteen kilometre night march to two villages called Alekowzi and Lal Mohammed suspected of harbouring Taliban. The lead proved false, or out of date, and the infantrymen rejoined their vehicles and decamped to Khakrez, the district capital, where they spent three days refitting in abandoned holiday villas and holding a shura with the district leader. The MOG continued to patrol this bleak mountainous district for a further three weeks, often picking up snatches of Taliban conversations on the ICOM scanners but never seeing the enemy. The weather in the meantime turned foul with heavy snow and temperatures falling to minus ten degrees. These extreme conditions inevitably began to take their toll and one night march during this phase of the operation had to be abandoned after two Gurkhas succumbed to exposure and collapsed. Major Paul Pitchfork, the officer commanding A Company had nothing but admiration for his men who endured this four week ordeal in the mountains:

‘As usual, the boys were superb. Every day they set off on patrol after a night sleeping on the frozen ground wearing everything that had brought with them, and some (including myself!) using two sleeping bags. Never once did I hear anyone complain.’’[521]

Pitchfork’s inspirational leadership over the course of the six month tour would earn him a Military Cross.

The second mission – Operation Sohil Laram 2 – also involved A Company working alongside a Canadian battlegroup. In this case the target was the compound of a suspected Taliban chief in the area of Maiwand. The company was lifted at four o’clock in the morning in two Chinooks and the operation almost ended in disaster as one of the aircraft landed heavily in the darkness throwing everyone to the floor. Only two soldiers escaped injury and both the platoon commander and sergeant were so badly injured they had to be evacuated. After some anxious minutes on the ground, during which time everyone was blinded by the swirling dust, the crew decided to risk flying back to Kandahar which was managed safely. The compound turned out to be empty although some intelligence was gathered. A Company was then informed that a group of Taliban had gathered in another compound seventeen kilometres to the east. Despite the fact that half the company was carrying some sort of injury from the heavy landing early that morning - and carrying loads in excess of sixty pounds - the Gurkhas doggedly marched through the night and surrounded this second compound before dawn. Once again the intelligence proved false and no Taliban were found.

A Company then spent the next six days pursuing mostly dead leads although on one afternoon they did manage to catch two Taliban dickers, one of whom had inadvertently forgotten to switch off his mobile telephone:

‘On one occasion, when 1 Platoon was leaving a village…they saw two young men on motorbikes stop suddenly when they saw our vehicles. Thinking this to be somewhat suspicious, they went to talk to them. As they were talking, one of the men’s phone rang. An Afghan soldier who was with us answered it and the voice on the end immediately asked if the ISAF vehicles were still in the village. He obviously didn’t realise that he was talking to a soldier and the subsequent conversation clearly indicated that the two individuals were what we call Taliban “dickers” – people who watch us and report on our movements. They were promptly arrested.’[522]

On another occasion, during a village search, they managed to catch a suspected Taliban commander trying to sneak away on a motorcycle.

Operation Sohil Laram 2 was the last operation undertaken by the Gurkhas before handing over to the incoming 3 Para. Although the Gurkhas performed stoically in extreme weather conditions and difficult mountainous terrain, their tour as the regional reserve force was largely a disappointing experience following poor or exaggerated intelligence leads. This was wasteful employment of enthusiastic soldiers who might have been better employed supporting Brigadier Mackay's vision of winning 'hearts and minds' rather than chasing shadows in the hills. The Gurkhas' ethnic and linguistic empathy with Afghan tribesmen – perhaps their most important quality in the context of what the British were trying to achieve – was not exploited.

The other serious flaw was the transient nature of the operations – a flaw recognised by their commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Bourne. The principal lesson he drew from his battalion's experience was that there was little point pursuing Taliban gangs if no meaningful ISAF presence or reconstruction followed. With this single insight, Bourne effectively sentenced the last six, futile years of Operation Enduring Freedom. His men had covered a vast geographical area. But their presence in the villages north of Kandahar had amounted to fleeting visits by foreign soldiers who subsequently departed leaving nothing behind. The locals knew these foreigners would probably not visit again, if at all, for many months. Their goodwill lasted only as long as the last dust trail vanished on the horizon. If prize was the population, this was not a strategy for winning that prize.

The Gurkha's bravery and endurance – especially tested in Garmsir - was never in question. Corporal Agnish Thapa was awarded a Military Cross for dragging a mortally wounded soldier across 100 metres of open ground and under fire. Rifleman Bhimbahadur Gurung repeated the feat, charging across open ground to thwart a Taliban flanking attack and then doubling back across the same bullet-swept ground with a wounded colleague over his shoulders. He was also awarded the Military Cross. A third Military Cross was awarded to Corporal Mohansingh Tangnami who led his section in a ten hour gun battle and constantly exposed himself to the enemy fire. To the Gurkhas – a deeply traditional people – emulating the wartime feats of 'our forefathers' was an almost sacred duty. As one of the medal winners later remarked: 'Now I can tell them stories.'[523]

In March 2008, the regional brigade that had been viewed with some suspicion by the rest of the army prepared to hand-over to the paratroopers of 16 Air Assault Brigade. The boys had become veterans and 52 Infantry Brigade had confounded the sceptics. Over six months, Task Force Helmand suffered just nine combat fatalities, the lowest casualty rate achieved by a British brigade before withdrawal in 2013-14, when the task force

effectively stopped fighting. Total fatalities including accidents represented just 0.16 per cent of the total deployed force, a fact that Mackay would use to defend his counter-insurgency philosophy.[524] This included three marines killed almost at the end of the tour in separate IED attacks in Kajaki and Sangin. The youngest British fatality, Trooper Jack Sadler, was just twenty-one. The oldest was a fifty-one year old reservist, Senior Aircraftsman Gary Thompson, who left behind a widow and five daughters. Part of the explanation for this dramatic collapse in British casualties may lie in the thumping that 12 Mechanised Brigade delivered to the tribes in the previous summer. The foul weather experienced that winter was another factor that probably discouraged fighting. But recognition must also be afforded to Brigadier Mackay who sought to impose a more enlightened and less belligerent approach to counter-insurgency. Ungenerously, Mackay's passionate attempts to encourage a different approach to the war were viewed by some as self-promotion. The lessons learned by 52 Infantry Brigade were duly collated and presented to the rest of the army – this was also typical of Mackay. But there was an old joke circulating in the army: a lesson was only learned if something was actually done about it. Otherwise it remained a 'lesson identified'. As 16 Air Assault Brigade unpacked its weapons and broke open ammunition boxes, the truism behind this joke was about to be confirmed.

CHAPTER 7
FIXED AGAIN
Operation HERRICK 8
8 April 2008 – October 2008

One of the odd aspects of the British war in Helmand, at least in the early years, was an unjustified mood of optimism that seemed to infect the replacement brigade. The commanding officer of 23 Engineer Regiment (Air Assault) wrote on his arrival in the province in the spring of 2008: 'I have been struck by how much has changed since I was out here 6 months ago. The country really is developing – and mostly for the better.'[525] His brigade commander later voiced the opinion that the war might be reaching a tipping point. Given the torrid six months the brigade was about to experience, what were they seeing?

For many months, independent observers had been warning that the situation in Afghanistan was deteriorating rapidly. Britain was now facing an escalating war and this had never been part of the calculation. Nobody had posed the difficult question: what happens if the war intensifies and spreads across Afghanistan? The assumption was always that 'the war' had been won in 2001 and that operations in Afghanistan were about stabilisation and reconstruction. Two years into Operation Herrick the sense that this was an entirely new war - a Pashtun nationalist war underpinned by the opium trade – was still not properly recognised. The possibility of defeat was hardly countenanced although 16 Air Assault Brigade would raise the prospect by the end of the tour. The true costs of continuing on the same path were inadequately assessed, or not scoped at all. Bringing the war to an end was vaguely couched in terms of an 'exit strategy' that existed only as a set of principles, not concrete plans. It was personalities like Rory Stewart, ex-soldier and diplomat, who offered the counter-arguments to this optimism.

'We need a policy which reflects our actual capacity rather than our hubristic fantasies. We cannot win a counterinsurgency campaign against the Taliban. We do not control the borders with Pakistan, where insurgents find safe havens and support. Our troop numbers

are limited and so is our understanding of local structures. Nato is divided and uncoordinated. The Afghan government lacks the capacity to provide the level of support which we require. The local population is at best suspicious of our actions. In Helmand, where we have increased the troop presence from 200 to over 7,000, our gains can only be temporary. It is more dangerous there for foreign civilians than it was two years ago, before we deployed our troops.'[526]

Operation Herrick, far from being a success, was heading for failure.

In an interview for the *Los Angeles Times* in mid-January, a deadpan Robert Gates bluntly warned that within NATO there are 'some military forces that do not know how to do counter-insurgency operations'. His comments echoed the sentiments of the pessimistic and influential *Afghanistan Study Group Report*, co-chaired by retired General James Jones and Ambassador Thomas Pickering.[527] Their verdict was bleak. Afghanistan now stood 'at a crossroads' and the 'light footprint' needed to be replaced urgently with the 'right footprint', or more troops.

While it was the case that Afghanistan was backsliding towards steeper levels of violence this pessimism needed to be qualified. The overwhelming majority of insurgent attacks were occurring in just thirty-three districts (8.2 per cent of the national total), and were affecting about 4.9 per cent of the population.[528] The portrayal of Afghanistan as a country wracked by widespread insurgency was inaccurate. The problem for the British was that these facts were largely irrelevant – British troops were parked in the epicentre of the insurgency. It mattered little that the insurgency was barely visible in Herat or Bagdhis. In Helmand the levels of violence had rocketed and the situation was clearly worsening, not improving.

At the helm of the newly-arrived 16 Air Assault Brigade was Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith. Originally commissioned into the Irish Guards, he had served as a squadron leader and commanding officer of 22 SAS on operational tours in both Iraq and Afghanistan. He would be the second ex-special forces officer to attempt to solve the puzzle of Helmand, and like his predecessor Ed Butler, he would leave the province a disappointed man.

There were other similarities between the two men. Both were old Etonians. At forty-two, Carleton-Smith was the youngest brigadier in the British Army. He seemed destined for the top, even if his directness reportedly rubbed against conventions. Brigadier Carleton-Smith had warned that the deployment of British troops in Helmand might provoke an insurgency after completing a reconnaissance of the province in 2005.[529]

Whether or not this was a remark taken out of context and later resurrected for posterity, Carleton-Smith's brigade indisputably now faced a growing insurgency. The word insurrection would not be coined for another year by *The Economist* (Anthony Cordesman described the resurrected Taliban as a 'Pashtun-driven insurrection' as far back as May 2004, but was ignored as usual).[530] It was now a matter of academic debate whether the British were facing an insurgency or outright rural insurrection. For Carleton-Smith, the deteriorating security situation posed a challenge as he had strongly argued that a less violent campaign stood a greater chance of success. One officer who attended his pre-deployment pep talks remembered him echoing John Reid's sentiment that it would be better to return home claiming that no bullets had been fired, rather than boasting about the number of battles that had been fought.[531] 'We are not fighting a war,' he was quoted as saying, 'we're supporting a democratically elected government to prosecute a counter-insurgency campaign, the nature [of which] is much more political than it is military'.[532]

For the paratroopers who deployed to Helmand in the spring of 2008, this was an opportunity to redress the wrongs of their first deployment two years earlier. Like their brigadier, they too would leave disillusioned men. Carleton-Smith arrived with the expectation of continuing Mackay's policy of avoiding destructive confrontation but this would remain a vain hope. The possibility of success for 16 Air Assault Brigade was undermined before the paratroopers even set foot in the province. Their deployment was always likely to be flawed because the brigade was sent to Helmand without a credible plan for taking the campaign forward. Both Whitehall and PJHQ offered little beyond 'do more of the same'. Neither the overall strategy nor the broken Helmand Plan were seriously reviewed or questioned. Additional resources – critically in reconstruction – were never provided. The sense that Britain was at war was discounted. For policy makers in London, Operation Herrick was still a stabilisation operation that had wobbled at the beginning but which now appeared to be back on track with casualties at a manageably low level. The campaign was about restraining budgets, constraining troop numbers, and limiting casualties – not winning. This complacency was dangerous folly. To stand still in Helmand was to fall back. The landscape, like the often-quoted scene with the Red Queen in *Through the Looking-Glass*, was continually moving forward. The Taliban, unlike Whitehall policy makers, were playing to win.

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The Task Force Helmand hand-over was followed by a change of command in ISAF. On 3 June, General David McKiernan took over from General Dan McNeill. He would be

President Bush's last general in Afghanistan. McKiernan arrived with high expectations. He had commanded the ground campaign in Operation Iraqi Freedom and proved to be a decisive and quick-thinking commander. He also came with experience of peace keeping operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. President Karzai welcomed the new general with one of the great understatements of the war: 'Your tasks will not be easy,' he told him.[533] McKiernan barely needed reminding. 'Bottom line,' he commented in his inaugural interview, 'there is no military solution to the problems here'.[534] In this respect, McKiernan would be the last American general to play the fall-guy in Afghanistan. He would entrench the strategy of clear-hold-build and give fresh impetus to training the Afghan security forces but he would never be given sufficient resources to accomplish the task. His successors – notably General McChrystal – would steal the limelight, but it was McKiernan who laid the foundations.

The recapture of Musa Qaleh by the previous brigade meant the British task force was once again as stretched as ever across a geographical space it could not hope to adequately control. The four British battlegroups were spread out across nineteen bases and four geographical areas: Battlegroup North (2 Para); Battlegroup North-West (Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders – 5 Scots); Battlegroup South (Royal Highland Fusiliers – 2 Scots); and Battlegroup Centre, held by the Danish. Carleton-Smith was acutely aware of this over-stretch and was determined not to allow the British task force to be committed to additional districts in Helmand. The manpower and logistic bill for fighting an essentially static, defensive war from forts, rather than an agile, mobile war, necessarily implied that the British were going to dig in and mostly attempt to hold on to their few gains. The near-impossibility of meaningful command in these circumstances was highlighted by the manner in which the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were dispersed across patrol bases in the province. The northernmost company of this battalion - which had been shoddily treated in the build-up training before deploying to Afghanistan - was 150 kilometres distant from the southernmost company. The notion that the Jocks could do more than just hold the ring at their respective patrol bases was unrealistic. The battlegroup HQ necessarily deployed to the Musa Qaleh District Centre which had become the de facto headquarters of the Battlegroup North-West area. With all the Argyll and Sutherland companies scattered across Helmand, this location had to be reinforced by B Company of the Royal Highland Fusiliers (2 Scots) and B Company of the Highlanders (4 Scots). Only the reconnaissance platoon remained with its parent headquarters. A Company found itself under command of a different unit in Garmsir and B Company was deployed to the provincial capital Lashkar Gar, to act as a guard and quick reaction force.

The sole remaining company – D Company – was despatched to FOB Keenan to reinforce the equally hard-pressed Danish in the Battlegroup Centre area.

At Now Zad – a town that nobody wanted and which was passed between ISAF units like an embarrassing mistake – the situation was even more unsatisfactory. Over six months, five companies representing three nationalities took turns to man the old ANP station the Gurkhas and Royal Regiment of Fusiliers had once defended. A British company (drawn from 1 Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment) was first relieved by an Estonian contingent, which in turn was replaced by F battery, 7 Royal Horse Artillery. The Estonians then returned before finally handing over to Task Force 2/7 of the US Marine Corps. For the locals this was a disaster. Nobody was pretending that a deployment to Now Zad was anything more than a stop gap measure and no reconstruction was discussed or attempted. With the arrival of the US marines, strongly imbued with a sense of mission by their Commandant General who feared the US Army was cutting the USMC out of the action, reconstruction swiftly turned to outright destruction. Every ISAF unit had left its mark in Now Zad with bullet marks and damaged buildings but the US marines managed to completely trash the single bazaar road. With tactics forged in ugly scraps like Fallujah, it was perhaps almost inevitable that the arrival of the marines would augur another spike in the level of violence. Two years after Stuart Tootal led the operation that sparked off the rebellion in Helmand, Now Zad truly hit a nadir.

Although 16 Air Assault Brigade was known, at least in the popular imagination, as 'the Paras', only one parachute battalion was actually available to Carleton-Smith. The 1st Battalion was permanently committed to supporting British special force operations in Afghanistan, and the 3rd Battalion had been detached from the British task force to act as a regional reserve based in Kandahar. A more accurate description of Carleton-Smith's command would have been the Celtic Brigade. In addition to the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, supported by companies from the Highlanders and Highland Fusiliers, the brigade also included 1 Royal Irish Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Ed Freely. All these units taken together would represent the biggest concentration of Celtic regiments of any of the Operation Herrick deployments to date. Compared to their Scots brethren, the Ulstermen seemed to draw the short straw. Of all the towns in Helmand, Sangin had already developed the worst reputation. This was where C (Ranger) Company deployed, as part of the 2 Para battlegroup, with smaller detachments located in Tangiers, Waterloo, Blenheim and Tufaan 3 patrol bases. The Royal Irish also took over the responsibility for guarding Kajaki dam and for mentoring the ANA at Camp Shorabak.

Additional teams deployed to Gereshk and the Upper Gereshk Valley in support of the Danish battlegroup. To make up the numbers needed to meet all these commitments, 116 members of the Royal Irish Territorial Army battalion were mobilised from their civilian jobs. No other British Army infantry battalion would manage to mobilise as many of its reservists in one tour. As so often in the past, Irish loyalty to the Crown was second to none.

The combination of Sangin and a large number of volunteer civilian soldiers might have suggested the Royal Irish would pay the heaviest price on Operation Herrick 8. The reverse proved true. The regiment almost managed to reach the end of the six month deployment without suffering a single fatality. The achievement of the Royal Irish to stay ahead of the gunmen in the most hostile town in the province could not be denied – the battalion would in fact suffer fewer casualties than any other British unit deployed in these badlands over the course of the war, and many fewer than were suffered subsequently by the US marines who took over the town. The Royal Irish's unique accomplishment in Sangin was and remains remarkable.

This could not be accounted by a lack of hostility on the part of the mainly Ishaqzai and Alikozai tribesmen. As one Ulsterman recalled:

'Sometimes you just know that you're wasting your time by the way an individual looks at you. It can speak volumes out here. All too often we are greeted by "Stinkeye" a term referring to the, "*I really don't want you here infidel*," look. Other times you patrol an area and it's as if Amy Winehouse has reproduced with an angry version of Borat to produce hundreds of grumpy individuals baying for your blood. Oddly enough you could patrol the exact same area an hour later and you're as popular as Cindy Crawford at a stag do.'[535]

Fortune may have played its part, and it is true that the density of IEDs had not yet reached the saturation of later years. But sound tactics also surely contributed to the low casualty rate. In contrast to companies in the Sangin Valley, for example, the Royal Irish commonly conducted joint patrols with the ANA. This practice offered numerous advantages. The ANA may have been chaotic and unused to Western military discipline but they were excellent at gauging the mood of the locals as well as at spotting IEDs. The Taliban also seemed less willing to engage patrols if they included Afghan soldiers and the presence of Afghan soldiers seemed to reassure uncommitted tribesmen who were naturally suspicious of Western soldiers. Irish warmth may also have worked on the normally icy locals. An exchange of words typically proved a fruitful experience:

‘Foreigners will never be welcomed openly in public due to the threat of the Taleban, however once in compounds and out of sight of strangers they are most sociable. Most groups of males will invite you to sit, enjoy tea and air their problems with you. Traditionally and in no particular order these problems are Pakistan, the establishment of Pashtunistan, the Afghan National Army and the kafir (infidel i.e. you!).’[536]

It was interesting that at least in this soldier’s perception, ordinary residents of Sangin blamed ‘Punjabis’, or Pakistanis, for their ills.

A characteristic operation mounted from the Sangin District Centre would see a platoon pushing out to areas seldom visited by British troops to test reactions and gather intelligence. Mostly these patrols would yield little of value but occasionally the rangers would hit the jackpot:

‘During the past week, 7 Platoon went out to engage with locals in a village to the south to talk about potential developments we can make in the area. While the sections were in their cordon surrounding the shura, an IED explosion rocked a section as it exploded nearby. Luckily, none of the men were even scratched by the blast which left a crater 3 feet wide and 2 feet deep. After receiving some hot intelligence from the locals, 7 and 8 Platoons together with the OC returned the following day to uncover more IEDs. What ensued was a true testament to the progress being made in Sangin. Numerous locals approached the callsign giving the exact locations of all the IEDs in the area including a booby trapped motorbike in a nearby mosque. In total, 6 devices were discovered and destroyed by the American disposal team……a bad day for the Taliban.’[537]

The assessment of progress was over-optimistic but the Royal Irish could make the truthful claim that Sangin was not sliding backwards.

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The basic insurgent tactic involved mounting an ambush and then out-flanking the disorientated troops. Sometimes the best counter-tactic was an old fashioned bayonet charge. At the height of the summer’s fighting, 8 Platoon, commanded a Sergeant McConnell, found itself caught in just such an ambush, in open ground. With bullets ricocheting around him from two insurgent machine gun positions, Sergeant McConnell’s Irish fighting spirit was aroused. Fixing a bayonet he charged off towards the gun positions, killing the occupants of one of the positions with rifle fire and grenades. At this point he was joined by one his rangers and the pair then set about destroying the second gun position. Despite this reverse, the gunmen were not finished. A group had managed to

sneak around the back of the platoon and were threatening to cut off their escape route. Taking charge again he led his platoon out of the ambush and into safety, winning a Military Cross for this outstanding courage and leadership.[538]

The Sangin-based company did finally suffer a fatality at the end of the tour. The soldier killed was Ranger Cupples whose life story was archetypal of the great Irish Diaspora. Justin Cupples was born in the United States, the son of Irish migrants. After the September 11 attacks he joined the US Navy and served on Operation Iraqi Freedom. Imbued with a sense of double patriotism – both for his adopted country and for the British Isles - he returned to County Cavan, the family's ancestral home and joined the British Army. As he described it, he still had unfinished business with the people who had perpetrated the September 11 attacks. Along the way he picked up a young Lithuanian bride who had also migrated west searching for a better life. Ranger Cupples never did get to grips with al-Qaeda. He was killed by a roadside bomb, conducting one of many routine patrols around the District Centre.

With Ranger Company of the Royal Irish holding the central ground in Sangin and its satellite stations, the remainder of the 2 Para battlegroup, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Joe O'Sullivan, deployed its companies north and south of the town. B Company went to FOB Inkerman and C Company to FOB Gibraltar. D Company was deployed to the multi-national FOB Robinson where it was supported by the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards (Scots DG) mounted in Scimitars. One platoon from D Company was detached from the company and sent north to guard Kajaki Dam.

What the paratroopers found, at whichever base they deployed, was a landscape scarred by almost two years of fighting:

'Most of the locals who lived in the Green Zone close to the FOB have moved out of their compounds…In the Green Zone there are a lot of these compounds, and many are empty. Some of these are used as firing points by the Taliban, so whilst on patrol we have to look for these firing points. Some compounds have been destroyed by air assets long before we came here. Some areas are smashed to pieces.'[539]

Communities, it appeared, were being destroyed in order to save them. The British seemed to be disregarding Tacitus' warning: *Insequitur relinquitur in solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant* '…in their wake nothing remains but a desert [and] they call it peace'.[540] Despite the war damage, it would have been wrong to portray rural Helmand in the spring of 2008 as uniformly hostile to the British soldiers. One of the surprising aspects of

patrolling in the Sangin Valley was the encounter with the genuinely friendly local farmer, whatever his motives for displaying hospitality towards the foreign soldiers. There were also the ubiquitous children who could descend on a patrol like pecking starlings, before vanishing back to the compounds.

'Local children often approach the section on masse, demanding sweets, pens, and pretty much anything you haven't tied down to yourself. As you can expect this can get quite frustrating, not to mention a somewhat dangerous distraction, but on the other hand, it does mean one thing…you're safe.'[541]

Equally, it would be too easy to accuse the paratroopers of spoiling for a fight. The airborne mentality was certainly evident. The officer commanding D Company expressed this ethos without embarrassment when he enthused:

'The greatest pleasure in commanding … paratroopers, is that you don't have to give them any motivational pep talks to close with and kill the Taliban. The greater challenge is in holding them back, like a pack of baying Alsatians!'

It would be simplistic to take such statements as evidence that 2 Para deployed to the Green Zone with blind, aggressive intent. On deploying to FOB Gibraltar, C Company organised weekly shuras and planned a series of modest reconstruction projects. For the first two months, there was barely any fighting. The sister companies similarly deployed to their respective bases with the intention of winning 'hearts and minds'. The fight came to the paratroopers rather than the other way round, and the turning point seemed to arrive at the end of the poppy harvest.

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In the first week of June, FOB Gibraltar was attacked with rockets, which provoked an angry reaction from the locals who feared British retaliation. Then, on a hot Sunday morning in the same week, a B Company multiple stepped out of FOB Inkerman to undertake a routine patrol. The intent of the patrol was to collect low level intelligence and to gauge the 'atmospherics' of the area. The patrol was uneventful until it reached a small cluster of compound farms at about 11 o'clock, a few hundred metres from the base. When the paratroopers passed one of the farms a young man stepped out to observe them. He seemed harmless, perhaps even high on drugs. As Private Daniel Gamble, the patrol's linguist, moved forward to practice some Pashto phrases that he had spent forty weeks learning on a long language course, the young man detonated a suicide vest. Gamble died instantly. Two other paratroopers died alongside him, Privates Nathan Cuthbertson and

Charles Murray. They were both just nineteen years old. With the deaths of these three paratroopers, British fatalities in Helmand passed the symbolic one hundred mark.

The suicide attack that killed the three B Company paratroopers had a profound influence on the manner in which the soldiers would operate for the remainder of the tour. The change in mood was exacerbated by what appeared to be a coordinated attack on FOB Gibraltar. A second bomber was forestalled by a quick-thinking patrol, but three days later a C Company multiple was ambushed which resulted in the death of two more paratroopers. A line was crossed and the paratroopers became more overtly aggressive and bent on killing insurgents. This, in turn, provoked cycles of violence within the settlements of the Gereshk and Sangin Valleys, where every Afghan family group was related and where horizons stretched not much further than the next village. 'Hearts and minds' in the Green Zone was largely abandoned. All locals were ordered to remain at least fifty metres from the troops. In a procedure that unfortunately recalled controversial images of Israeli checkpoints in Palestine, anyone who wanted to draw closer had to lift their shirts to show they were not concealing a bomb.

Stopping and searching Afghans sometimes had its comical moments as a soldier serving with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders recalled:

'This is where the very diligent Pte Howie was searching the locals and found what would appear to be a foreign object under his clothing which aroused his suspicions. He then asked the local to remove the object and with a beaming smile the local produced 1 x Erect part of his person much to Pte Howie's disgust.'[542]

Such moments aside, stop and search was a disaster particularly for the paratroopers in the Green Zone. Without the possibility of interaction, however difficult, the soldiers were just another occupying force routinely humiliating the locals. Mutual incomprehension turned to alienation and then to sullen hostility.

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By the height of the summer every patrol leaving FOB Gibraltar or FOB Inkerman had a high chance of becoming engaged in a gun fight. Bereft of ideas, the British continued their patrols throughout this period and the locals duly replied with volleys of gun fire and RPGs. Each of these futile spats was another opportunity to create a blood feud. The paratroopers, with their superior training and weaponry were much better at drawing blood, especially when they were able to call for support from Apaches or from the gun battery at FOB Robinson. But laden as they were like pack mules, they were unable to

exploit their successes. British infantry were literally becoming fixed by the weights they were being ordered to carry. Measurements taken in Helmand in the summer of 2008 showed that the weights carried by infantry sections typically amounted to 74.14 kilograms for section commanders, 65.35 kilograms for grenadiers, 72.41 kilograms for light machine gunners and 69.14 kilograms for light-support weapon gunners.[543] The unpopular Osprey body armour alone weighed 22 pounds. While undoubtedly saving lives – a certain Gunner Carl Jordan serving with 7 Royal Horse Artillery had the distinction of having been saved twice on separate occasions by his body armour, earning him the nickname of 'bullet magnet'[544] – it remained unpopular with the infantry.

A subsequent article in the *British Army Review* pointed out that the loads soldiers were being asked to carry were well in excess of the weights that could legally be loaded on animals like pack horses and mules – in some cases, soldiers were carrying twice the legal limits.[545] A Sergeant Thornton who served with 2 Mercians (Worcestershire and Foresters) described a typical load:

'The osprey body armour, whilst it is an extremely worthwhile piece of kit and a lifesaver, it does induce fatigue on the troops fairly quickly, due to weight. The ammo scaling for the soldier has to be finely tuned to the task. Carrying an excess of ammo will be more of a hindrance than a help. However, the general rule of thumb is ready ammo scales. For the rifleman it consists of 6 mags, a bandolier, 2 HE grenades, one red phosphorous, one smoke grenade, one 1.5 rocket illum and a pack of mini flares. In addition to this, 10 rounds of 40mm HE grenades is carried per UGL gunner. For the machine gunners, they carry 800 rounds of 7.62mm or 5.56mm link. The normal scaling for 51mm rounds is 10 of each nature for the platoon. Add to this 4.5 litres of water, a days' worth of rations, radios and spare batteries, night vision equipment, medical kits and stretchers per section, a bit of warm kit and spare socks (if required), and then a few more 51mm bombs spread through the section, it all gets quite heavy.'[546]

As a rough rule of thumb, the distance marched in six hours decreases by one mile for every ten pounds a soldier carries over forty pounds. Given that some soldiers were carrying over 100 pounds of equipment this rule paradoxically suggested that soldiers were marching backwards - an apt metaphor for some of the patrolling that was taking place in the Green Zone. It was perhaps entirely coincidental but the only four Victoria Crosses awarded in the war by 2010 were won by soldiers not wearing the Osprey body armour – or soldiers light enough on their feet to actually close with the enemy.[547] Three

went to Australians and New Zealanders, as ever a tough breed on a battlefield.

With this amount of weight – in some cases equalling the body weight of the soldiers – just crossing a few hundred metres of broken ground represented a major physical effort. Tactical options, such as out-flanking the insurgents, no longer became realistic. Dealing with a casualty effectively ended a patrol because it was taking at least six men to carry one casualty. In the summer of 2006 the paratroopers had been given the option of wearing no body armour or wearing a relatively light ballistic vest.[548] By the summer of 2008 this freedom was taken away by a military hierarchy concerned with negative media reporting over unprotected troops. If the same strictures had been applied in the Falklands Conflict, just twenty-five years previously, the assaults on the hills surrounding Port Stanley would have been humanly impossible. At Tumbledown, Lieutenant-Colonel Scott ordered his men to wear berets into the attack, not helmets, from a sense of regimental pride. Let them know the Scots Guards were coming! Those days had long vanished in an army weighed down, not just be body armour but by fears of litigation.

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One of the inevitable consequences of these extreme loads was an increase in musculoskeletal injuries. Overall rates of minor injuries increased in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2009, from four per cent to seven per cent.[549] This represented a loss of 6,700 man days, or manpower brigadiers could ill-afford to lose. At any one time, one per cent of the force in Afghanistan was invalided with a musculoskeletal injury. On major operations, this figure spiked. Over the course of 16 Air Assault Brigade's tour – a formation whose soldiers were toughened by the demanding selection procedures for service in airborne forces – the task force still managed to lose 1,966 man days, including 322 days lost in burdensome evacuations and 452 days lost to costly treatment in Britain. The British soldier mule, even the paratrooper version, clearly had his physical limits.

If the paratroopers could no longer mix and match their body armour as they saw fit, they still jealously held on to their privilege to dress as they pleased. In the withering heat of the summer, the *de rigueur* dress style became the sleeveless tee shirt (revealing bulging biceps and airborne tattoos) topped off with bandoliers of ammunition. It was Ramboesque, cocky, and above all, set them apart from the rest of the 'hats' in the brigade. The paratroopers had been criticised in the summer of 2006 for their propensity to dress informally. It mattered little to them. This was 'ally' and going to war was as much about looking good as doing your job. The men of 2 Para would be the last to dress in such a fashion before a Helmand-wide dress code was imposed on British troops, scotching the

individuality of units for the sake of that most sacred military principle – uniformity. Facial hair would go the same way, even though Afghans tended to view beardless men as ‘boys’ rather than men.

In the daily tit-for-tat gunfights across hedgerows, the villagers rarely scored a hit. 2 Para would experience over 400 gun fights, on one day becoming involving in fourteen shootouts with locals.[550] Tens of thousands of rounds were fired at the paratroopers over a roughly five month period which resulted in the deaths of just four soldiers. This amounted to bullying by the British who were so superior that the willingness of the villagers to risk their lives by taking pot shots at the patrols was arresting. The Tom on the frontline did not, naturally, see it this way. Any bullet winging in your general direction was a potential danger. Every punch up with the villagers was an adrenalin rush, followed by a state of nervous exhaustion and a flood of relief that you and your mates had not suffered injury or worse. Private Smith, serving at FOB Inkerman was ‘quite surprised at how well organised the Taliban are and the way they surround us, plus the rates of fire they put down’, even if the fire was wildly inaccurate.

The daily routine of gunfights across hedgerows and ditches affected soldiers in different ways. Some paratroopers enjoyed this circus. There was a buzz about being caught up in a battle which sharpened senses and heightened emotions in an intoxicating way. For Private Goodall, who had only recently walked into the army from ‘civvy street’, war was incomparably more exciting than his former humdrum life:

‘On the plus side the feeling of a contact or walking into an ambush, there’s no feeling like it, that’s when 2 PARA work best, I can’t see myself in a civilian job after the contacts I’ve been in knowing we made it out alive, just!’

Some, like the paratroopers in D Company, were motivated by feelings of revenge:

‘Every man in the company is extraordinarily determined to get their own back against the Taliban on behalf of their mates…They say that there is nothing better than being in the midst of your fellow soldiers in situations like this; I can vouch for that without hesitation. I’m afraid that this won’t give all of you back home many restful nights but it is better to be straight with you.’[551]

thers became worn by the repeated grind but repressed their fears. The fact that very few paratroopers were being killed did not mean that few were also being injured. In fact, the injury rate was so high it continually threatened to debilitate the companies to a point where they were no longer effective. Private Smith, who had been surprised by the well-

drilled Taliban tactics also recalled:

‘My platoon alone has lost 8 toms [privates] due to various circumstances, everyone wants to get on the ground and get the job done, but most of the toms in the FOB are constantly back filling other platoons to make numbers up, so blokes are often very tired plus less enthusiastic about being out on the ground again.’[552]

Combat injuries only accounted for a proportion of the wounded. There was also a weekly bill of ‘DNBIs’ or ‘Disease and Non-Battle Injuries’. C Company reckoned that one in three of the paratroopers deployed to FOB Gibraltar in the end succumbed to some sort of injury or illness during their tour, although the company ‘only’ suffered five combat fatalities.[553] Tellingly, three of the five were point men, the most exposed position in the patrol.

Fighting in the Green Zone had three distinct seasons. During the opium poppy harvest in April and early May there was little fighting as a large influx of workers migrated to Helmand, some of whom would remain behind to earn more money fighting as ‘ten dollar Talibs’. During the wheat planting in May and June the fighting would once again resume with both sides testing each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Late summer was perhaps the most dangerous time with the maize crop exceeding head height, providing excellent cover for the insurgents. 2 Para patrols operating from FOBs Gibraltar and Inkerman found that there was an 80 per cent chance of a gun fight every time they left their bases. And as one paratrooper candidly observed it was the insurgents that held the initiative with ‘99% of the fights… started by the Taliban’.

The insurgents, at least at the beginning of the summer fighting season, had the advantage of knowing the ground. This was the same winning card played in earlier Anglo-Afghan wars, as recalled by General Andrew Skeen who fought in the frontier wars of the early 20th century:

‘They have full knowledge of the ground, over which they have grazed their goats since childhood, protective clothing to a marked degree in their filthy rags, good eyesight, and an instinct for danger, without which they would not survive in this land of blood feud and inter-tribal warfare.’[554]

The other advantage was numbers. The villagers could easily muster more fighters than the companies could deploy on any single patrol. The average gun fight perhaps only

involved a dozen gunmen but on occasions the paratroopers were attempting to battle over 100 young men drawn to the sound of gunfire, a quite impossible task, even with the advantages of better training and weaponry.

Corporal Baillie serving with 4 Platoon, B Company at FOB Inkerman described a typical patrol, which almost always started under cover of darkness:

‘0230 and its [sic] time to get up, Dragging the rest of the lads out of bed, I start sorting my kit out making sure everything is ready for patrol. I confirm I have all my ammo and plenty of water two of the most vital items in the Green Zone. 0330 and my section have loaded our weapons and ready to go. Our platoon leads the way to our objective in the pitch black. The green circle of my night vision the only reason I can follow the guy in front of me. It’s an odd feeling moving silently through compounds and corn fields, the only sounds the occasional dog barking or crackle of static from my radio. As the sun rises and the calls to prayer start we reach our objective. Going firm we wait for the orders to begin searching target compounds for signs of the enemy.’[555]

At daybreak the landscape would be transformed. The cool of the night would quickly burn away and the almost jungle-like Green Zone would become humid and sapping:

‘Quietly you stalk forward through corn fields which raise several feet above you head denying you any view of your surroundings. All the time you have to remind yourself that while you cannot see the enemy they are out there. The humidity ensures that you’re perpetually drenched in sweat; soon it’s as if you’re actually wearing a wetsuit. Forget putting on your protective goggles they steam up within minutes of your patrol departing. Your shoulders scream with pain from the awkwardly heavy body armour and daysacks you’re wearing. All the time minute flies buzz around your head driving you crazy.’[556]

This was like the fighting in Normandy, but with the temperature ratcheted up.

In this game of cat and mouse between hedgerows and tree lines the most dangerous position was ‘point’, or the lead section. Acting as the eyes and ears of the platoon, this is where Corporal Baillie found himself, facing the familiar problems with the Bowman radio:

‘’Goth, you’re [sic] sections point section buddy’ the words I have been dreading, so off we go again looking for a fight. Minutes later we find one, having seen what I believe to be enemy movement I get my section into cover forming a fire base from which to engage the Taliban, I get on my radio, surprise surprise, when you need it communications

don’t work. As I am getting the message passed up the chain of command to bring mortars onto the Taliban they engage us with RPG fire and small arms. Unlucky for them my section is already in position and know where the Taliban are. One section four platoon open up with withering fire power quickly winning the fire fight, and surpressing [sic] the enemy we call in fire support. My section 2ic takes over command of the section and I move position and join the platoon commander and help identify the enemy locations, not long after mortars and artillery are firing and the enemy are destroyed, not before my section has fired over 1000 rounds and I have fired the 66mm rocket launcher onto one of the enemy’s positions.’[557]

This engagement, like hundreds of others that summer in the Green Zone, resembled a fight between two half-blind boxers swinging punches at each other. Despite the confident assertion that the Taliban had been ‘destroyed’ it was equally likely the artillery and mortar fire had simply caused the gunmen to run for cover. Nobody was checking the target area to see if anyone had actually been hit. The 66mm rocket that Corporal Baillie fired, more often than not, was fired off by soldiers not in the hope of killing anyone but simply to shed the weight. The thousands of rounds that were exchanged defoliated trees and bushes but rarely found their targets. In this close quarter fighting, the danger of fratricide was ever present. 11 Platoon of D Company would call an artillery fire mission on itself, wounding three paratroopers. Later, a white smoke grenade tossed by paratroopers would be mistaken by an Apache pilot as an indication of the enemy position and a further five paratroopers would be wounded. As many paratroopers were being injured by friendly fire as by the wild fire of the insurgents. This was ‘looking for a fight’ as Corporal Baillie put it, but for what purpose?

Over time, both sides became wise to each other’s tactics and expert at the threat that different weapons posed. Those who did not learn quickly died. There was a clear hierarchy of danger from small arms and machine guns: ‘…5.56mm the Taliban ignore; 7.62mm worries them; .50-calibre scares them’.[558] On occasions, the villagers could manifest almost suicidal courage, but they were also respectful of the vast array of technology being thrown at them, especially from the skies. This awareness of the threat from the skies developed quickly. The Israeli Hermes 450 UAV had a noisy engine and the sound of this aircraft buzzing in the sky commonly prompted gunmen to take cover until it had passed. Aircraft could arrive overhead a gun fight within about twenty minutes so the villagers learned to start drifting away at about this critical time. Apaches, or ‘mosquitoes’ as the Taliban called them, were slower but they frequently proved more devastating. In

the overwhelming majority of gun fights the pilots, and especially helicopter pilots, were the only people who actually saw the enemy, even if only as black and white blobs on their video display units. One insurgent speaking to a British journalist found ISAF a far trickier opponent than the Soviets: ‘This war is more difficult, the enemy controls the skies and has lots of weapons,’ albeit quickly adding, ‘but we yearn for fighting the kafirs. It’s a joyful thing’.[559]

Comparisons with the Soviet-Afghan War could be found elsewhere. One insurgent boasted:

‘In areas where there are government or international forces, they only control their posts and 1km around, and we control the rest. If we cut off the countryside then the cities will come under our control – we know that from our experience with the Soviets.’[560]

No honest British soldier would have contested the first part of this assertion but the judgement that Afghanistan’s cities would inevitably fall to the Taliban was fanciful. It was knowledge of the ground that was all-important and the insurgents retained a great advantage in this respect:

‘The good old Taliban… nine times out of ten will know exactly where we are on the ground. They dress like local nationals which makes it impossible to spot them. They’re quick on the ground because they don’t have half the kit we do, which allows them to get in and out of firing positions pretty fast.’[561]

So observed Private Abol, a veteran of dozens of gun battles with B Company, 2 Para. The frustration for the British, acutely felt by the airborne soldiers, was the lack of helicopters to mount the most effective tactical ploy open to a conventional army – the helicopter assault. Successive battalions would argue the case that more helicopters were needed to generate a campaign based on airborne rather than ground manoeuvre, but this deficit was never truly addressed before the British switched their attention from winning to withdrawal.

The biggest fear, unquestionably, was provoked by Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) rather than by enemy gun fire. It was this weapon that afforded the Taliban the only hope of redressing the imbalance between the two adversaries and it was used extensively. When the Royal Irish found six IEDs in a single day in Sangin it was considered a great novelty and was widely reported. Within a year, five times this many IEDs were being uncovered in Sangin on one road. The widespread use of the roadside bomb, which almost seemed to catch the British unprepared despite their recent difficult

experience in Basra, was nothing new. In the 1930s Pathan tribesmen employed ‘tin-can bombs’, as they were then known, to ambush Indian Army troops, recycling ordnance in the same manner as the Taliban:

‘Our ‘dud’ shells and aeroplane bombs have provided the tribesmen with a supply of high explosives, which he has latterly been turning to good account in the making of tin-can bombs, which are generally buried and lightly covered with sand on ‘kachcha’ road or track. When found they must be treated with the greatest respect.’[562]

The advice for dealing with these bombs would have made the modern health and safety-bound army blanch: ‘The best way is to explode them with rifle fire from a safe distance.’ At least this method only posed a danger to the intrepid soldier taking a pot shot at the bomb. British soldiers frustrated by Arab terrorists in the inter-war years employed a more novel but morally dubious tactic: they would nab a ‘wog’ and sit the unfortunate on the bonnet of the lead vehicle of a convoy.[563] Self-evidently, this trick was not available in the armoury of a modern soldier. The modern day Taliban also profited from dud ISAF bombs and shells. British 81mm mortar bombs and 105mm Light Gun shells were improvised as IEDs and some older American aerial bombs manifested a high failure rate, creating a headache for explosive ordnance disposal teams who raced to find the duds before the Taliban got to them. In a few cases the bombs buried themselves so deeply that neither side recovered them.

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By the summer of 2008, the rise in the number of roadside bombs significantly increased the workload of the Bastion-based, Joint Force Explosive Ordnance Team or JFEOD – basically, there were never enough of these soldiers to deal with the rising number of IEDs. A typical call would come as a ‘10 liner’ giving the grid reference of the suspected device. A team would then deploy by helicopter to destroy or render the bomb safe. Even with the assistance of a mechanical wheelbarrow this entailed great risks to the bomb disposal officer. In the summer of 2008 the JFEOD would lose one of its most charismatic and experienced operators – Warrant Officer ‘Gaz’ O’Donnell – a hugely popular man who had already received a gallantry award in Iraq. Even the most experienced bomb disposal officers, it seemed, could get caught out. O’Donnell had been tasked to clear five IEDs discovered near a three-storey building south of Musa Qaleh, known as US Patrol Base (USPB). B Company, 1 PWRR provided protection in Warriors, but the operation proved hectic. One Warrior, crewed by a Lance-Corporal Kelly, took three hits from RPGs, blinding the driver.

To outwit the bomb disposal officers some Taliban bomb makers constructed their IEDs to initiate either by downward or upward pressure. Anyone lifting such a device would be killed instantly. In O'Donnell's case it appeared that he unwittingly set off such an anti-lift device. He died clearing the last of five IEDs, at the end of a blisteringly hot day under fire. His sacrifice would be recognised with a posthumous bar to his George Medal. A fellow Warrant Officer – Benjamin Kelly – would be awarded a Military Cross for recovering O'Donnell's body. That summer was also noteworthy because a Captain Louise Greenhalgh made history as the first female and Territorial Army bomb disposal officer deployed on operations. Appropriately, in her civilian life, Louise Greenhalgh was a risk assessor. By the end of 16 Air Assault Brigade's tour the JFEOD had dealt with over 800 roadside bombs – a massive jump on the previous year.

For the sections that daily ventured from the patrol bases, the only sure protection was mine-sweeping every step of the way. This was undertaken with the new German Vallon mine detector in a drill known as Operation Barma. It added a verb to the English language – to barma – and barmaing became a way of life for the soldiers of the task force. It called for sharp senses, nerve and infinite mental stamina. Good Vallon men became prized but they also became exhausted and vulnerable to enemy snipers. A Corporal Jamie Kirkpatrick of 101 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal), named his Vallon after his fifteen month old daughter Holly. His expertise at finding IEDs meant that he inevitably led from the front. At the height of the summer fighting his luck ran out and he was shot and killed in a clearance operation near the notorious CP Kingshill.[564] Vallon men were a breed apart, an exclusive club and one whose members knew they were playing Russian roulette every day they stepped out to patrol. The range of standard section formations – double file, column, extended line, arrowhead – were replaced by a single formation - the 'Afghan snake.' Every soldier tried to place his feet in the boot prints of the soldier preceding him to stay inside the safe lane cleared by the Vallon man – although this measure did not offer an absolute guarantee of safety.

June proved to be the most difficult month. The passing of the threshold of 100 fatalities was met with a predictable rash of media articles questioning the point of the war. These served to increase the nervousness of the Labour government over the drift and conduct of the campaign. Gordon Brown's government was already facing what appeared to be a spiralling global financial crisis that threatened to provoke a severe recession, if not depression if the more gloomy prognostications were to be believed. A year into his premiership and with his leadership under question from backbench rebels, the last thing

Gordon Brown needed was a ‘bad war’. The mission in Afghanistan was beginning to look just like that sort of war even as Britain had managed to extricate herself from Basra.

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In the Westminster Hall debates held on 17 June, Adam Holloway, a former soldier and now Conservative Member of Parliament was scathing of the government.[565] The war in Iraq had been ‘crazy and unnecessary’. The operation in Afghanistan was ‘incompetent and half-cocked’. The excuse that ‘we are where we are’ was barely acceptable as a foreign policy strategy. Holloway’s attack carried some credibility as uniquely he had visited Helmand twice at his own expense and he was the only British politician who had couched local opinion before the arrival of the British task force in 2006. What he found was ‘a pretty quiet place’ – a far cry from the war zone that Helmand had become by 2008. Holloway’s litany of British failures made painful hearing but what really struck at the core of the government was his questioning of the rationale of the entire mission. The sacred cow that Britain was engaged in a war in Afghanistan to keep British streets safe from terrorism was ‘nonsense’. In Holloway’s words:

‘The effects of our over-ambitious and ill-resourced plan has been further to radicalise large numbers of people across the Muslim world…to assert boldly that al-Qaeda will return to Afghanistan in a meaningful way is almost ridiculous.’

This was an argument the British government could not concede. If the whole business of ‘keeping Britain safe’ was flawed and over-blown, then why were British soldiers dying in Helmand in the first place?

Without making any such references, Holloway had resurrected old sores and debates that Americans at least should have been aware of. More and more, Afghanistan was beginning to look, feel and smell like Vietnam. This was a war, as historian Donald Mrozek later astutely wrote, in which, ‘…any solution attempted could in turn generate new problems; thus, the risk was that these problems would fan out in geometric fashion from a common but quickly forgettable point of origin. Each new problem could then call attention in its own right, potentially distracting interest from the broader goal to which the original solution had been devoted’.[566] Helmand had similarly become a Zeno’s paradox: infinite steps in a geometric convergence, and no apparent forward movement. Who could remember the point of origin? Were British soldiers really keeping other Britons safe by picking fights with Pashtun tribes in south-west Afghanistan? What was the point of it all?

Among the fatalities that helped tip the total over the one hundred mark was Corporal Sarah Bryant, serving with the Intelligence Corps, the first woman to die in combat in Afghanistan. That a woman had been killed was emotive enough but Corporal Bryant was also an attractive young woman with a sunny smile and this seemed to make the death more poignant. The media seized on her death as a newsworthy story and followed the progress of her body back to Britain, covering her funeral. There was a twist to the story that gave it more wind. Corporal Bryant had died in a Land Rover Snatch along with three other colleagues from the Territorial Army SAS.

The Land Rover Snatch had already become a cause célèbre with the media as the exemplar of poor equipment foisted on betrayed troops by an incompetent government. In the heat of the debate some facts were lost and judgements were distorted.

The Land Rover Snatch, or Snatch Vixen as the upgraded version was later known, was a vehicle originally designed for patrolling in Northern Ireland. It was a Land Rover Defender series vehicle over which a ballistic shield based on a glass composite, fibre-reinforced material had been placed, to provide better protection for the crew. This composite material was widely viewed at the time as a technological breakthrough. It weighed significantly less than metal alloy shields; it offered comparable levels of protection; and it did not suffer from 'after-armour effects', or the splash of hot metal caused by a projectile penetrating an armour shield. The original order for 1,000 vehicles was placed in 1991 and cost £50 million.[567] The main purpose of the shield – in the context of Northern Ireland - was to provide protection from rioters, not high velocity bullets or shrapnel fragments. The first Land Rover Snatches deployed to Iraq were this variant (some still had the khaki green rather than desert brown camouflage). The vehicle certainly offered advantages: anyone could drive it, it was easy to maintain and it was rugged. In towns it did not appear hostile to the local population. In the countryside it could negotiate the roughest tracks. As a general, light utility vehicle it was ideal. The worldwide Land Rover success story was not some industrial fluke.

As the situation in Iraq deteriorated it became apparent that the ballistic shield on the Snatch's needed to be upgraded. The slide into insurgency in Basra was not an overnight event. For the first two years of Operation Telic the security situation in southern Iraq remained relatively benign. When it deteriorated seriously, roughly over 2005-2006, the spiral of violence was fast and seemed to catch everyone by surprise. All self-protection measures had to be re-assessed. The Land Rover Snatch was just one among dozens of vehicles that needed (and were provided with) additional protection.[568] By this stage,

however, the media had noticed that this vehicle was especially vulnerable, and there had been internal debate in the army over its use and possible substitution.

The problem with the Land Rover Snatch was that it had already become over-laden with the weight of the new Bowman radios and additional electronic counter-measures (ECM) equipment. The amount of armour plating that could be added to the vehicle was limited by its axle weight (roughly 2,000 kilograms on the rear axles of a standard Land Rover Defender), and nothing could be done to significantly alter the flat bottom of the vehicle to deflect blast. The program to up-armour the original series Land Rover Snatches took longer than was desirable. It was not until late 2008 that the Army received its first batch of the up-armoured vehicles (the Vixens). Some delay was caused by internal debate over whether to up-armour the vehicles, or simply to restrict their use. In Iraq, it was decided that the best policy was to ‘go heavy’, that is, to rely on the better protected armoured vehicles, and to restrict the use of the Snatches to areas with a low IED threat.

The three years that elapsed between the increase in violence in Basra and the fielding of a better protected Snatch destroyed the reputation of the vehicle. Despite better British tactics and a raft of counter-IED measures, soldiers continued to die in the Snatch. This delay was both unfortunate and untypical of the speed of procurement of Urgent Operational Requirements or UORs. The rapid fielding of UORs was a MOD success story and a sharp contrast to the painful failures of ‘big-ticket’, formal procurement programs. Overall, the media never gave the Ministry credit for the alacrity with which it managed a plethora of UORs – literally hundreds of programs – that were generated by the war in Iraq and later in Afghanistan. The relatives of dead servicemen, naturally, were unlikely to give quarter to a government perceived as incompetent and penny-pinching.

A second problem that had to be addressed, placing in doubt the very value of up-armouring the Snatches, was the escalation in the insurgent’s armoury. Roadside bombs became larger. Iranian-supplied EFPs or Explosively Formed Projectiles began to make an appearance. These could penetrate the sides of the best protected vehicles. No vehicle could guarantee the protection of its occupants against an EFP and the extra armour on the side of a Land Rover Snatch stood no chance against this type of device (Major Matthew Bacon, also serving in the Intelligence Corps, was killed by such a device in the back of a Land Rover Snatch. His father became a vociferous critic of the government, when perhaps his understandable anger might equally have been directed at the Iranian regime that was supplying the IED kits used to kill his son). As well as the IEDs, there was also

now the problem of snipers.

Over thirty servicemen died in Land Rover Snatches in Iraq (from a total of 179 fatalities). More servicemen died in accidents. The majority of the fatalities in the Snatches were the top cover sentries, or the exposed position at the top of the vehicle. They were being killed by the bomb blast and shrapnel fragments, as top cover sentries everywhere in Iraq were being killed, in all types of vehicles, regardless of the armour protection. They were also being killed, towards the end of the British tenure in Basra, by the snipers. Again, this threat affected all top cover sentries, irrespective of vehicle or armour protection. The extra armour added to the Snatch Vixens in fact did its job. Lives were saved and the occupants of Snatch Vixens escaped bomb strikes relatively unharmed. In the end, however, it remained a light utility vehicle, albeit now weighing over four tons, and nothing could alter its overall vulnerability to the threat of roadside bombs in Iraq.

A solution would have been to replace the Snatches with a vehicle in a similar class with better protection, but no such vehicle existed. By definition, a light utility vehicle is light. The only real solution was to abandon the concept of light utility vehicles altogether and to step up a class to vehicles weighing between 5-10 tonnes or more. In the end this is what the MOD chose to do (or was forced to do) but in Afghanistan, not Iraq. By the summer of 2006 the government had taken the decision to procure American Cougars (the renamed Mastiffs) and these were fielded a year later in Afghanistan. In Iraq, the decision was taken to strengthen the FV432 armoured personnel carrier with Israeli armour, a not unreasonable decision given the Israeli experience with the Iranian-backed Hezbollah. The Warriors and even the Challenger tanks were also up-armoured. The government was not complacent over the problem.

However, the army would not abandon its perceived requirement for a light utility vehicle, despite the vulnerabilities, and there is questionable rationale for this stance. The official reason, repeated on numerous occasions, was that light vehicles were less likely to offend locals and thus were better for winning ‘hearts and minds’. While in principal this is true, it was also the case that the mantra of winning ‘hearts and minds’ was a delusion in Basra, and a mirage in Helmand. In many ways, the army was the victim of its own self-deceiving refrains which every sensible journalist could see did not match the reality. Nobody was particularly winning Basrawi or Helmandi hearts, or could, regardless of what vehicles British soldiers rode. Imagining that somehow British soldiers were being more ‘friendly’ by driving Land Rovers was a terribly weak argument.

The decision to procure an oxymoronic ‘heavy’ LPPV (Light Protected Patrol Vehicle)

was not taken until 2008 but this tardy decision should be seen in the context of a variety of options that were being considered to create the most appropriate fleet mix. Entirely abandoning the now up-armoured Land Rover Snatch Vixen was still not judged an obvious decision during this period – the army was still arguing for and procuring vehicles that were as dangerous to its crews: the open-top Land Rover WMIKs and Jackals. During 16 Air Assault Brigade's 2008 tour of Afghanistan three such open-top Land Rovers struck mines or IEDs. These vehicles were even more dangerous to their crews than the Land Rover Snatch and yet the worst injury suffered from these three attacks was a broken leg. The army also ordered a batch of Vector patrol vehicles (based on a Pinzgauer chassis) assessing it to be tougher, and then found that it had to retire these vehicles within a year of entering service because they were inadequate against the type of roadside bombs found in Afghanistan. Some soldiers pointedly refused to mount the Vectors considering them death traps. The same problem was experienced with the Viking, a tracked vehicle that had to be replaced by the Warthog. The Panther also proved a disappointment and was withdrawn from Afghanistan. Mistakes were made. The sheer size of the training and maintenance bill generated by the new vehicles being rushed into service was overwhelming the army. Each new vehicle type required courses, instructors, integration into existing weapon and electronic systems, and the establishment of a new supply chain. The army was 'running hot', as the Chief of the General Staff, General Dannatt, remarked, and the influx of new vehicles made it run even hotter.

Corporal Sarah Bryant, along with her three colleagues, did not, in the end, die because she was travelling in a Land Rover Snatch, for which culpability could be laid on the Ministry. She died because of an improbable coincidence of circumstances and because the unlucky crew struck a massive IED. On 13 June, 100 kilometres away to the east of Lashkar Gah, the Taliban launched an audacious attack against Sarposa Prison, detonating a fuel tanker laden with explosives against the front gate and liberating over 1,000 prisoners. The attack left fifteen police officers dead and among the escapees were 390 Taliban fighters. The only people who chose to remain within the prison were the female prisoners who feared the Taliban more than they desired liberation. Using the cover of darkness the majority of the prisoners seemed to flee west into Arghandab District, an area very similar to Helmand's Green Zone. By the following day a massive manhunt was underway and the three SAS men, with Corporal Sarah Bryant, joined ANA soldiers they were mentoring on checkpoints on Highway 1. As long as the Land Rover Snatch remained on the tarmac road the chances of an IED strike were negligible as the Taliban could not bury bombs under the hard road surface. Later in the day the team was ordered

to rendezvous with an infantry company south of the highway. To avoid the threat of IEDs they chose a difficult and little-used cross-country route but became bogged down. After a struggle they managed to extricate themselves and were advised of a better track that would lead them to the waiting infantry company. As they approached a choke point in the track the team commander dismounted and carried out the standard vulnerable point or 'VP' drills. This involved walking ahead of the vehicle sweeping with a Vallon mine detector. Somehow the large IED buried in the track was missed. Afterwards, a lack of training was blamed but the fact was that experienced and well-trained operators also missed IEDs, as did the specially trained military working dogs. A one-man Vallon was always going to be a risky procedure.

The Snatch was barely recognisable after the blast. The only vehicle that would have withstood the blast that killed Corporal Sarah Bryant was the American Cougar, specifically designed for bomb disposal operations, and then adapted by the British as the Mastiff infantry troop carrier. Even the Warriors were vulnerable to IEDs of this size as the Gurkhas would discover later in the year in Musa Qaleh. The Territorial Army major whose soldiers died alongside Sarah Bryant did not see it this way and handed in his resignation in disgust (somewhat disingenuously, as he reportedly wanted his men to deploy in the more dangerous but sexier Land Rover WMIKs – had they done so, the response teams would have struggled to find reasonably-sized body parts to ship home) . The media, as ever, were quick to fan the story. The Land Rover Snatch would continue to be used in Afghanistan for several years and there would be no further incidents involving this vehicle. In a curious footnote, the much-maligned vehicle would end its service illustrating that British engineering inventiveness was still alive. A specialist automotive company based in the heart of old England's industrial revolution offered to convert a number of Land Rover Snatches into unmanned vehicles steered by proxy drivers.[569] The idea was accepted and the now unmanned Snatches were used to steer convoys through more dangerous locations, without the necessity of risking human life.

Just over a month after this tragedy, a second tragedy unfolded at Kajaki Dam, which had been the bitter scene of the costly mine strike during 3 Para's tour in the summer of 2006. Despite the fact that the situation at the dam was entirely stalemated, the British could not resist mounting aggressive patrols against the villages north of their base. These achieved nothing and they put at risk the lives of the soldiers. On 22 July, such a patrol unravelled with terrible consequences. That evening, an X Company patrol decided to occupy a vacated compound with the intention of using it as a sniper's lair. One of the X

Company snipers, Lance Corporal Tom Neathway, moved a sandbag that had been placed near a window to create a better firing position and set off a booby trap. He later described the sensation of being blown up as similar to a rugby tackle. The explosion caused the traumatic amputation of both his legs and left his right arm dangling by its tendons. His life was saved by a cool-headed South African, Lance Corporal Jan Fourie, who dealt with the injuries promptly. The first phase of the casualty evacuation was undertaken on the back of a Quad bike, which was the only transport immediately available to the paratroopers. In the meantime, a Vector ambulance was despatched to meet the quad bike from FOB Zeebrugge. The soldier at the wheel of the vehicle was Corporal Jason Barnes, an armourer serving with the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, who volunteered to act as the ambulance driver. Crashing back down the track that led to FOB Zeebrugge the Vector struck a second IED. With the driver's seat directly over the wheel arch of the vehicle, Corporal Barnes stood no chance and was killed instantly. X Company now had a fatality as well as the injured Neathway from the first booby trap to deal with. Lance Corporal Neathway would survive his terrible injuries as a triple amputee, the second of the war. A year later he would feature in a documentary that revealed both his remarkable courage as well as the personal Calvary faced by servicemen in his predicament. In an unfortunate twist to the story, it would subsequently emerge that he was bullied within his regiment - shameful behaviour that was only finally acknowledged after he repeatedly sought justice from the MOD. Kajaki for the paratroopers would always be that cursed place.

For the task force, the weekly routine revolved around mounting platoon or more ambitiously, company-sized patrols. 16 Air Assault Brigade also mounted six task force level operations over the course of the summer. Two were disruption operations in areas that had been visited on several occasions by preceding brigades (the Upper Gereshk Valley, the Upper Sangin Valley and Musa Qaleh). One was an extended relief in place of 24 Marine Expeditionary Unit (24 MEU), the first of the US marine units to arrive in southern Helmand (Operation Oqab Jarowel). A strike operation was also conducted north of Musa Qaleh in mid-June (Operation Oqab Luma). The last involved the deployment of the Afghan special force unit, Task Force 444, to the Lashkar Gah area following disturbances in Marjah west of the provincial capital, at the end of the tour (Operation Oqab Soba). The single largest operation, which was reported extensively in the media and which required the redeployment of around 2,000 ISAF and Afghan troops, involved the delivery of a third turbine to Kajaki Dam.

The failure of the government to address the management of the war decisively was

painfully revealed by the controversy over the deployment of 24 MEU to assist the beleaguered British company holding the abandoned agricultural college FOB Delhi, at Darvishan. The situation at Darvishan in many ways summed up all that was wrong with the British mission in Helmand. As well as FOB Delhi, the British had set up a checkpoint on the American bridge spanning the Helmand River (known as Ypres), and built a reinforced observation post on a tumulus overlooking the bridge (JTAC Hill). A second British outpost called Vittoria was set up in a two storey-building five hundred metres east of JTAC Hill, next to an old clinic known somewhat optimistically as Haza Joft Hospital. At Balaklava Bridge, a further kilometre to the east, another checkpoint was established. North of the road was the crumbling ANP station, prison, and the abandoned L-shaped bazaar. Darvishan was a dying town when the Royal Marines deployed there in the winter of 2006, and the British presence seemed to deal it a mortal blow. The town was vacated, the bazaar closed, and a front line formed about 500 metres south of Route 605. The marines raided Taliban positions but lacked sufficient numbers to dislodge their enemy. The Taliban in turn sniped, mortared and fired rockets at the British. The Gurkhas took over from the marines and eighteen months later, when A Company of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, reinforced by reservist soldiers from 3 PWRR and the Yeomanry took over FOB Delhi, nothing had changed.

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The significance of Darvishan to Regional Command (South) was that it represented a Taliban ‘gateway from the south’. Fighters and supplies from Pakistan transited through Darvishan before joining the fight further north. Although it was almost certainly a stopping point by virtue that it boasted the only bazaar and petrol station for many miles, holding Darvishan did not stop the flow of Taliban from the borderlands to central Helmand. There were dozens of alternative routes, both in the Green Zone and in the open desert. What the British presence did achieve was to open a second front in the south. The company post acted as an irresistible magnet to local insurgents and the by-product of the fighting was the evacuation and collapse of the town. For Governor Mangal the ‘loss’ of Darvishan was an unacceptable affront. Regaining the town and revitalising the local economy had become one of his highest priorities.

With limited troop numbers there was little the British could do to change the balance of power in the south. The Americans, with their superior troop numbers, could make the difference. The proposal to use 24 MEU to force the insurgents away from Darvishan – effectively to push the front line a further ten kilometres south to create a ‘security bubble’

around the town - was resisted by both by the FCO representative in Lashkar Gah, Michael Ryder, and by his political masters in London.[570] Fraught diplomatic traffic bounced between London and Lashkar Gah as British officials attempted to thwart the American proposal. In effect, Whitehall policy makers preferred the stalemate to a successful offensive that might force London to increase the British commitment (because more troops would be required to hold the expanded security cordon). If the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders based at FOB Delhi had known that officials in Whitehall were prepared to leave them in their desperate situation indefinitely, rather than accept an American offer of assistance, they may have been a little less inclined to risk their lives on a daily basis.

A tension between civil servants (and their political masters) fretting over the British commitment to Helmand, while soldiers died, was crudely exposed. To his great credit, Brigadier Carleton-Smith refused to endorse the FCO position and Whitehall had to cave in. For the American negotiators, military and civil, this pantomime performance only served to fuel suspicions that the British camp was divided and weak. This chimed with a broader fear in the summer of 2008 that all the European NATO allies were on the brink of folding, highlighted in a critical report to Congress.[571] For the British Army, these civilian machinations caused deep anger. The suspicion of a government 'stab in the back' – which some saw as the reason why the campaign in Iraq had ended in embarrassment and ignominy – was revived. Government officials were sending a strong signal that they really did not care whether the army 'won' in Helmand. The balm of a government public relations machine would smooth over the eventual political and military outcome, as it had done in Basra. What mattered was avoiding commitment and restraining costs. For the army, winning in Helmand had become a vital cause, especially after Iraq. There was also a moral debt to the dead. Government spin doctors viewed casualties as 'bad news days'; the army, as fallen comrades. The division between these two pillars of state was not in the imagination of Americans observing their British counterparts. In the summer of 2008, the Labour government sailed dangerously close to losing the loyalty of the army.

Operation Azada Woza ('Stay Free'), the 24 MEU mission led by Colonel Peter Petronzio to expand the security bubble in Darvishan, began in early May. His command was slightly larger than a typical USMC expeditionary unit. In addition to 1/6 Marines (the veterans of Guadalcanal), the unit brought its own battery of M777A2 155 mm lightweight howitzers, the first time that this British-designed gun had been deployed with a USMC unit. Ironically, the M777 – a British-manufactured gun that was unarguably

effective in Helmand - was not procured by the MOD, even as it was winning favour with foreign armies. 24 MEU also deployed with a reinforced air wing comprising a Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron (HMM 365), and strike aircraft. An additional USMC contingent - 2/7 Marines - was tasked under separate command with training Afghan security forces. The motto of this unit was ‘Ready for Anything – Counting on Nothing’, which seemed appropriate for its new task. All these deployments were meant to be short term but the marines ended up staying in Helmand until November.

The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders assisted the US marines at the start of the operation by securing their left flank and forward passage of lines. After that it was an American show. What the US marines uncovered surprised them. A dense network of trenches, rat runs, tunnels and underground bunkers had been built in a belt south of Darvishan. The threat of IEDs was ever-present. The Taliban however were no match for the 2,500 strong force. Colonel Petronzio leant on the door and it swung open. Over the next three months a ring of checkpoints and observation posts were built at key canal crossing points and track intersections: Nijmegen, Hamburger Hill, Hassan Abad, OP Rock, Myhand, Tuffan, Pamir, Sharnahad, and the most southerly, Masood. Jugroom Fort, which had cost the life of Lance Corporal Ford and led to the daring retrieval of his body, was finally wrested from the Taliban. Although government officials had capitulated to Carleton-Smith, no additional British troops were made available to man these new bases once 24 MEU left so they were handed over to the ANA and ANP. Before it redeployed, 24 MEU distributed $832,000 in CERPs (Commander’s Emergency Relief Program funds) to locals to kickstart the reconstruction process. The US marines also handed out a total of $784,700 in battle damage aid. The British had no comparable financial mechanisms. However, to ensure momentum was not lost, a British MSST (Military Stabilisation and Support Team) was deployed to Darvishan and this would be followed by a small team from DfID.

24 MEU’s operation in Darvishan gave blood to a dying patient. The bazaar re-opened. Locals returned to farms they had abandoned because of the fighting. There appeared to be genuine gratitude that the Taliban had been ejected (although this was a common enough response elsewhere in Helmand from a population hedging its bets between the two warring sides). The backwater of Garmsir District suddenly became fashionable. The military bridge at Balaklava was replaced by the Royal Engineers with a bigger and better bridge. Major General Peter Wall, in his capacity as the senior Royal Engineer in the British Army, attended the opening of the new bridge with the governor of Helmand.

What may have galled the Americans was the manner in which the British quickly took the praise for the rejuvenation of Darvishan. From a place which the FCO wanted nothing to do with, the town quickly became recast as an example of a British ‘success story’. DfID blogs and defence media articles gushed with stories of Darvishan’s renaissance, but the fact that Whitehall had initially opposed the operation was entirely buried.

If politicians were demonstrating a reticence over expanding Britain’s war in Helmand, Brigadier Carleton-Smith was showing no such coyness. Shortly after arriving in theatre 16 Air Assault Brigade had launched an air assault operation – Operation Oqab Sterga (‘Eagle’s Eye’) - against a suspected Taliban lodgement near the mainly Barakzai village of Regay in the lower Musa Qaleh Valley. The intelligence had been grossly exaggerated portraying a 300 strong insurgent force, but the paratroopers advancing on both sides of the river wadi encountered little opposition. The only casualty was a marine driver who was killed by an IED when the Vikings used to re-supply the paratroopers returned to the Sangin District Centre. C (Bruneval) Company was landed first to the west of the wadi at 1.30 am and was met with desultory gun fire. The company objectives were three compounds nicknamed Tom, Dick and Harry which were quickly occupied without incident. B Company followed an hour later on the east side of the wadi (a simultaneous landing of both companies was not possible due to the lack of helicopters), and this company also quickly seized its objectives. At daybreak gunmen opened fire on the compounds and the paratroopers made the rare catch of a prisoner after killing one of the gunmen. An Apache tasked to support C Company also caught out an RPG team that was preparing to attack the paratroopers and scattered them with cannon fire. The fighting died out by midday leaving the soldiers with little more to do than watch the deserted fields until the early hours of the following morning when they advanced three kilometres north to Objectives Zinc and Tin, both of which were also devoid of enemy.

Although this operation achieved little of consequence, a similar manoeuvre was repeated south of Sangin using A and B Companies of 3 Para. The former deployed in a road move from Camp Bastion and spent two days in a desert leaguer receiving and returning occasional mortar fire. B Company joined the leaguer by helicopter on 13 May and four days later the two companies began probing patrols into the Green Zone. The aim, as one participant who took part in these operations recorded was ‘to reduce the numbers on the ground in the Green Zone and entice the enemy forces out of their holes.’ Unfortunately ‘they did not bite’.[572] Despite the absence of the Taliban, ‘the physical demands placed on the guys was immense, especially for the Sappers carrying the infantry

kit list plus their search and explosive method of entry equipment'. Over the course of the patrols a number of enemy bunkers were duly destroyed. One sapper enthused:

'It was barmine time for the Sappers. A chance to lighten the load slightly, as well as make a really loud bang! Who doesn't like blowing stuff up?'[573]

The young engineer's enthusiasm for blowing things up was part of the problem. 'Stuff' was being blown up but there was an inverse correlation between the amount of high explosives being expended and British progress towards stabilising Helmand. Over the summer, 16 Air Assault Brigade would launch 197 GMLRS rockets, against 138 aerial bombs. As at this stage there was no prohibition against targeting buildings, and using a very rough measure, this suggested around another 200 odd ruins in Helmand. After five days the operation was closed and 3 Para returned to Kandahar where the battlegroup was based as the theatre reserve.

On occasions, these disruption operations did lead to surprise finds that had eluded the intelligence. In the last week of June, 2 Para battlegroup mounted such an operation in the Upper Sangin Valley. This operation was one in a series of similar missions undertaken as part of Operation Oqab Talanda ('Eagle's Thunder') that ran from the beginning of June to the middle of July. The aim of the operation was to raid an insurgent stronghold in an Alizai village called Sar Puzeh. At the same time intelligence would be gathered on Route 611, which would potentially be used to transport a third turbine to Kajaki Dam. The village of Sar Puzeh was about twenty kilometres north of Sangin and straddled Route 611. To the east of the village was a dry wadi, several hundred metres wide and overlooking the entire area was a 1,000 metre high mountain feature known as Mali Ghar. Sar Puzeh itself extended north and south along Route 611 with farm compounds immediately behind the village reaching to the Helmand River. The area was notorious for drug-dealing and open criminality.

To achieve surprise C Company were airlifted by Chinook, at night, to a landing site immediately east of Sar Puzeh in the wadi.[574] The sound of the helicopters must have alerted the locals as the force was immediately engaged by machine gun fire. The situation became aggravated as the assaulting force discovered that nearly all their Bowman radios had dumped their settings. The radios needed to be set using a fill-gun prior to any operation. The fill essentially loaded the radios with the secure frequencies and call signs; information that allowed the radios to work within the network. Unfilled radios – or radios that dropped their fill – were useless. It appeared that the electronic counter-measures on the Chinook helicopters had caused 'ECM fratricide' erasing the memories on the

Bowman radios. When the battlegroup Tactical HQ landed minutes later it discovered that its radios had similarly dropped their fills. The situation was partially rescued when a fill gun was discovered allowing a proportion of the radios to be re-filled – not an easy task in the darkness and under fire – and by now all surprise had been compromised. It was experiences like this that provoked anger in the task force over what was perceived to be a botched-up procurement of a radio system that was visibly endangering lives. Some paratroopers openly admitted they would have preferred the older Clansman radios rather than bother with the unreliable Bowman radios.

Order was re-imposed and the paratroopers pressed on to their objectives, a set of compounds believed to be harbouring insurgents. A large amount of precursor chemicals were required to produce Afghanistan's heroin – around 13,000 tons annually according to UNODC. None of these were produced in Afghanistan and a number were 'non-controlled chemicals' making their smuggling less problematic. The most important of these chemicals was acetic anhydride. Again, according to UNODC, about 1,300 tons of acetic anhydride was being smuggled into Afghanistan and just one percent was being intercepted. The challenge for the narco-traffickers was hiding these vast quantities of chemicals that were generally transported in blue plastic barrels. As the paratroopers advanced on Sar Puzeh they were met with determined resistance. The reason for the resistance became obvious when the soldiers broke through, forcing the villagers to flee. Hidden in courtyards and sheds was heroin processing equipment and large quantities of precursor chemicals. In the overall context of Helmand's heroin production the find was trivial, but it felt like success after the fruitless operations at the beginning of the tour. The entire mission lasted fourteen hours over which period the paratroopers were under almost constant fire. Over the course of operation, the C Company sergeant-major, Warrant Officer Second Class Michael Williams, was mortally wounded. He died on the same day as Private Joe Whittaker, a Territorial Army paratrooper who had served in the Army Cadets from the age of thirteen. Whittaker's ambition had been to start officer training the following year. Two years' later, his sister, Musician Kate Whittaker, would also serve in Helmand.

Britain was now fighting a real war in a far-off land. Much closer to home, Britain found itself fighting a financial war that nobody had anticipated. In the summer and autumn of 2008 a series of chain events in the global financial markets provoked a massive credit crunch. Unthinkable emergency measures were taken to restore liquidity to the financial markets, most of which involved some form of 'quantitative easing', or the pumping of billions of funds of public money into banks close to bankruptcy. This was not

the turn of events that a wartime government needed and the question was inevitably raised - would the banking bail outs sink the war effort? Britain was still committed to maintaining a presence in Iraq and this was not cheap. The original invasion had cost an estimated £1.3 billion. Five years later the greatly down-sized Operation Telic was still costing the tax payer £1.4 billion.[575] Whatever else the British were achieving in Basra, cost-cutting was not one of them. In comparison, operations in Afghanistan, at the time, had seemed a bargain.

The dream of a cheap war, of course, had to come to an end. By the following year the cost of war in Afghanistan had doubled and by the end of the first winter of Operation Herrick it was just short of £200 million. The following year the reported cost jumped to £738 million. As the financial crisis loomed inter-departmental fighting broke out as Treasury officials tried to pass on the costs of military operations – up to this point funded from contingency funds – back to the MOD. This was the reckoning which the Ministry had feared might come one day, but which it had tried to stave off, mainly through the process of procurement through the Urgent Operational Requirements (UOR) mechanism. This allowed the Ministry to pass a fat lump of its costs to the Treasury, thereby protecting an already strained defence budget. By 2008, £3.5 billion had been spent on UORs. 240 UORs had been delivered in the previous year and another 300 were in the pipeline.[576] The credit crisis inevitably exposed this accounting trick. The true cost of the war suddenly became evident. In 2007-08, operations in Afghanistan cost a reported £1.5 billion. By the following year they had jumped again to £2.3 billion.[577] The overall cost of both campaigns, eight years after British troops first entered Afghanistan, and six years after the invasion of Iraq, was £13 billion.[578] This was money that a Labour government, weakened in the polls, would rather not have spent on foreign interventions, but in the uncomfortable context of a £50 billion bailout of the banking system, neither was it ruinous.

A financial crisis was not the only problem facing the British war effort. Over the last three decades, Britain's defence industry had been run down. The demise of Royal Ordnance was the archetypal example. This company had manufactured ammunition for the country's armed forces since the Tudor period. No other enterprise was so inter-woven with the history of the British Isles. Soldiers need bullets and plenty of them. Royal Ordnance was allowed to wither because it was argued ideologically and from no firm evidence that Britain would be able to source its ammunition requirements more cheaply through open competition (not uncommonly foreign firms championed and subsidised by their respective governments). There was no need to protect this state-owned

manufacturer. The markets should decide its fate. For some, this was an example of free market ideology over-riding all other considerations – the principal other consideration being the reality of war. The doubters were proved right.

When the Labour government committed Britain to operations in Iraq, and then subsequently to Afghanistan, it quickly became apparent that the ammunition bill was going to be much higher than a cost-cutting Treasury had anticipated. Not only could Britain not now supply its own ammunition requirements, but neither could foreign suppliers, and furthermore sourcing ammunition from abroad was proving prohibitively expensive. In 2004 there had been a demand for 90 million bullets. Five years later the ammunition bill had climbed to 236 million bullets.[579] There was only one solution and this was to re-invent the industrial wheel and revive an indigenous ammunition manufacturing capability in Britain. It may have come as some shock to the government to discover that the country, which as late as 1985 had sixteen ammunition factories employing 19,000 people (when Royal Ordnance was privatised under the Thatcher government), now had precisely one wartime-era ammunition factory. Britain had never been so unprepared to go to war in its entire history as a modern state.

The vital factory was located at Radway Green in Cheshire. Its infrastructure was so obsolete it needed a £40 million cash injection to modernize the facilities (now owned by BAE Systems). For the successors of British Aerospace (who after acquiring Royal Ordnance cheaply then proceeded to close factories and enforce redundancies), this represented a bonanza. Under the now fashionable Private Finance Initiatives (PFIs), BAE Systems signed a fifteen year deal with the Labour government to exclusively supply the British Army's ammunition requirements – effectively supplanting Thatcherite ideology with another equally contentious ideology. The cost of this deal was an estimated £2 billion, but the growing demand for ammunition would probably raise this figure to £3 billion.[580] This was not a bad return on an enterprise which the Thatcher government sold off for just £188.5 million. The whole saga challenged the assumptions of the original privatisation: if Royal Ordnance had not been eroded to extinction would the British tax payer have had to fork out quite so much to provide the army with its most basic requirement – bullets.

At the end of August, 16 Air Assault Brigade mounted the biggest operation of its six month tour, indeed the biggest operation attempted by British forces to date in Helmand province. The troops had known for months that the operation was likely to be mounted but the timing could not have been worse. After five months of attrition warfare,

accidents, and routine illnesses the brigade had lost over a battalion's worth of soldiers. In order to mount Operation Oqab Tsuka ('Eagle's Summit') soldiers would have to be scraped from every infantry unit in Helmand. There would be no reserve force, a normally unthinkable proposition in a military operation. The lack of helicopters and the sheer logistic difficulties of repositioning all the men and materials needed for the task meant that the operation started a full month before the proposed D-Day, to stand any chance of meeting its deadline. Many of the troops were exhausted from a summer of hot fighting and had their sights fixed on homebound flights, not the enemy. It would be the last major effort undertaken by the brigade before handing over to its successor.

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Operation Oqab Tsuka showed the British at their ingenious best and self-mythologizing worst. At stake was a $200 million USAID funded project to deliver a third turbine to the Kajaki dam. This project had been proposed in the early stages of Operation Enduring Freedom when American soldiers first explored the upper reaches of the Helmand Valley, building a new police station at Kajaki village and funding a clinic and school. The countryside had been benign then and it seemed an obvious and useful reconstruction project, potentially restoring electricity to tens of thousands of homes that had been cut-off from Helmand's rickety power grid since the days of the Soviet occupation. For USAID, Kajaki Dam was unfinished business from the 1970s – what better way to restore American prestige? In fact, the proposal to add a third turbine to Kajaki dam was flawed from the start. The turbine alone would serve no purpose. What was required was a major refurbishment of the entire power grid, such as it existed, as well as the construction of hundreds of kilometres of new supply lines. This second phase of the project was never seriously assessed or resourced. If ISAF was engaged in 'gesture strategy', to use Max Hastings' memorable phrase, then this was 'gesture reconstruction'. When fighting flared up at Kajaki, effectively creating a front line within shooting distance of the dam, the project stalled anyway. Now 16 Air Assault Brigade would be entrusted with reviving this moribund project.

The British ambassador, Sherard Cowper-Coles, and the civilian head of the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Lashkar Gah, Hugh Powell, were both completely set against the operation. It had become one of the features of the war in Helmand that the FCO in Afghanistan viewed itself as a legitimate arbiter and authoriser of large military operations. This was always going to result in unsatisfactory conflicts. The normally inviolable rule that the armed forces make the military judgements was being undermined

by nervous civilians whose over-riding concern was avoiding trouble. If an operation was likely to result in many casualties – or unpleasantness for political masters in London – then civilian officials tried to veto the operation. This had almost happened with the deployment of 24 MEU earlier in the summer, but FCO fears had been over-ridden by the robust attitude of Brigadier Carleton-Smith. Now it was about to play out again.

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In Operation Oqab Tsuka the army spectacularly shot itself in the foot by producing a wildly pessimistic assessment of the likely risks of the operation. In the over-heated atmosphere of the Task Force HQ at Lashkar Gah, staff officers estimated that an operation to deliver the third turbine to Kajaki, by driving up Route 611, would result in about fifty British fatalities and they began to dub the mission 'Operation Certain Death'.[581] This was a ridiculous assessment of the risk. The last time the British Army suffered over fifty dead in one operation was when the Gloucestershire Regiment was overrun by a Chinese division in the Korean War. Nobody seemed to question this estimate (which appears to have been derived from a computer simulation rather than common sense, suggesting involvement from the government scientists in DSTL).[582] Instead, the threat of an imaginary Taliban division grew in the minds of apoplectic government officials in the Helmand Executive Group who began to describe the operation as 'totally mad' and potentially disastrous for the entire British presence in Helmand province.[583] Cool heads were needed and an alternative plan to motoring the length of Route 611 (which would have provoked a fight with the Taliban but not on the scale envisaged). The real problem with driving up Route 611 was that it entailed risk to the turbine parts themselves. The British task force, with American assistance, was capable of blasting its way up Route 611, but who could guarantee that a chance IED strike or RPG might not damage one of the turbine load carriers and render the whole operation pointless. There were also serious questions over whether many of the road culverts could even take the heavy loads. Engineer reconnaissance had revealed that nearly seventy culverts would have to be reinforced to take the weight of the load carriers.[584] This represented a significant engineering effort, even without the probability that the work would be undertaken amongst a hostile populace. Understandably, nobody wanted this goose-sized egg on their faces.

The search for an alternative route began in earnest at the beginning of August although 16 Air Assault Brigade had not yet received confirmatory orders to undertake the mission. Pathfinder patrols, supported by engineers from Recce Troop 12 Field Squadron Royal

Engineers, explored two possible options identified from mapping and imagery. One of the routes followed a wadi at the base of a mountain pass and was determined to be a feasible option. Locals quizzed in the area confirmed that this route was frequently used to avoid the fighting in the Green Zone and the danger of roadside bombs on Route 611. This local knowledge proved useful, although it may also have alerted the Taliban that ISAF forces were intending to open up a secondary route to Kajaki that bypassed Route 611. Despite later claims that total surprise was achieved, it seems unlikely that this was the case. To secure the safe passage of the turbine, feelers had been put out to the Taliban and bribes offered (to no avail). That something was afoot could hardly have escaped the notice of villagers around Kajaki as three companies of paratroopers were redeployed to the area in the week previous to the operation.

The proposed route – baptised Route Harriet - essentially followed a little used dirt road that diverted north from Highway 1 across a deserted rocky plain in northern Kandahar Province (passing not that far from Maiwand village, the scene of the British rout in 1880). About thirty kilometres short of Kajaki the track swung sharply west and sneaked along the bed of a wadi known as Ghowrak Pass, named after a village of the same name about five kilometres to the east of the wadi. The total distance of this circuitous cross-country route was 180 kilometres and the convoy would end up completing the epic journey at an average speed of about one mile per hour. Ironically, the British already knew about Ghowrak Pass (or should have known) because A Company of 1 Royal Gurkha Rifles had patrolled this pass at the beginning of the year. The haemorrhaging of intelligence was one of the unfortunate features of the war in Helmand. Exactly the same mistake had been played out in Iraq with the British seemingly learning nothing from the experience. The system of rotating brigades every six months invariably resulted in the loss of intelligence and local knowledge which the departing brigade had managed to acquire. During the Vietnam War, US Army officer John Paul Vann famously observed: ‘We haven’t been in Vietnam for nine years. We’ve been in Vietnam for one year nine times.’ The same phenomenon was being repeated in Helmand with each brigade ‘re-inventing the wheel’ every six months. In Iraq, a frustrated Major General Shaw would beg the question: ‘Where has all the information from the past four years gone?’[585] The answer was: in the heads of the last lot, now on a flight back to Britain.

That the mission took place at all was due to pressure placed on the British by the American Ambassador, Bill Wood, and by informal understandings between the two soldiers General McKiernan, the US commander of ISAF forces, and Brigadier Carleton-

Smith. It was a damning comment on British political oversight and military command of the war in Helmand that the most significant mission undertaken in that year should have come about as result of back room deals between two operational commanders and American diplomatic pressure.

The exaggeration of the enemy threat, multiplied by an extreme risk aversion, meant that Operation Oqab Tsuka swelled into the largest undertaken by British forces, since their arrival in the province. A total of 4,000 soldiers were committed to delivering the precious third turbine to Kajaki dam, an index of British nervousness. To mount Operation Oqab Tsuka all other major ISAF operations in south-west Afghanistan were effectively suspended and lavish air support was provided for the mission. Although the British task force provided the bulk of the troops, Danish and Canadian units were also involved. The ANA deployed the 2nd Battalion from 3/205 Heroes Brigade, mentored by the British paratroopers (coincidentally this unit would be the first to be declared fully independent of ISAF support in the spring of 2011). The battalion would provide an 'Afghan face' and photo-opportunities for the arrival of the turbine at the dam itself. The use of this ANA kandak illustrated the difficulties the British were still experiencing with the employment of Afghan troops. Both President Karzai and Helmand's governor played the role of armchair generals and tried to dictate how national troops would be employed on the operation. On the very eve of Operation Oqab Tsuka the ANA 2nd Battalion almost found itself sent back to the provincial capital to enhance local security, in case of an imagined Taliban backlash. This aborted plan also highlighted another feature of the operation - the inaccurate intelligence and almost paranoid exaggeration of the insurgents' capabilities. This would become especially evident at Kajaki itself where an overwhelming amount of force was used against villagers who simply melted away. Private Jack Howard, 3 Para, later killed in a subsequent tour, recorded: 'If there's one thing I've learned, it's NEVER believe the intelligence'. Like too many other aspects of British military operations, intelligence had become confused with health and safety, provoking the usual gross exaggerations and risk aversion.

Just getting the massive turbine to the dam would prove a significant challenge. The turbine components weighed about 200 tonnes so they necessarily had to be split between several heavy equipment transporters.[586] Seven trailers would be needed to carry the components: four for the transformers, the smallest of which weighed twenty-five tons; two for the stators; and the last for the upper bracket assembly, which weighed about fifteen tons. The most critical components were the stators. These had been custom-built

and damage to one of these would probably have resulted in a two year delay before a replacement could be supplied.[587] To protect the components from the possibility of damage, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers fashioned steel cages from old ISO containers, adding another twenty-eight tonnes of steel to the load.

Despite all the political and military hurdles, a 100 vehicle convoy carrying the turbine parts did eventually leave Kandahar Air Base on 27 August, under command of Lieutenant Colonel Rufus McNeil, the Commanding Officer of 13 Air Assault Support Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps. Command of the operation at the Kajaki end was vested in Lieutenant Colonel Huw Williams, the 3 Para Commanding Officer. The convoy set off in darkness, pointed itself north, and reached the open plain largely undetected. Within the convoy there was a wide mix of vehicles reflecting all the different specialists needed to keep the train moving: paratroopers in Jackals protected the open flanks; Queen's Royal Lancers in Vikings providing close protection with heavy machine guns; and sappers in heavily protected Mastiffs pushing mine rollers. Behind them a line of tractors and dump trucks filled with aggregate stood by to undertake road improvements. The convoy stretched for over six miles creating a dust trail that could be seen for miles. As it snaked past hostile villages it risked attracting volleys of gunfire but once past areas of habitation the soldiers were driving over a moonscape. The rocky gravel plain north of Kandahar is a barren, deserted area and the only signs of life were the occasional suspected 'dicker'. It took four days of hard driving for the convoy to finally reach the mountain pass, placing it just one day's drive away from the dam.

Coincident with the departure of the convoy, clearance operations began at Kajaki itself. The village of Kajai Olya – believed to be harbouring Taliban – was especially targeted. Intelligence had suggested that two compounds were being used as command centres by the insurgents. One of the compounds codenamed Sentry was on the eastern bank of the Helmand River. The second compound, Big Top, sat astride Route 611. The ANA kandak, under British direction, was tasked to clear both compounds. Once these compounds had been cleared, D Company from 2 Para would pass through the ANA positions and clear the remainder of the route to FOB Zeebrugge. B Coy from 3 PARA would relieve D Company and finally A Company would secure the coordination point with the convoy on Route Harriet.

Advancing on compound Sentry, the ANA soldiers met little resistance. In an unequal fight, the compound was destroyed by a salvo of GMLRS rockets. The biggest challenge for the British mentors proved to be stopping the ANA soldiers from pillaging fruit from a

nearby orchard. The ANA companies then re-organised and advanced on the second compound from which they received sporadic fire. This position was also quickly overcome by a massive use of firepower – 150 artillery shells, as well as mortar and aerial bombs rained down on Big Top. By the time the paratroopers arrived on their lines of departure to take over from the ANA kandak there was nothing left to do. Any insurgents and all locals had fled the area.

For the convoy, this last stretch was the most treacherous. The reconnaissance had not properly assessed the state of the track through Ghowrak Pass and it was discovered that some impromptu road-building had to be undertaken to allow the passage of the Heavy Equipment Transporters. Having negotiated the mountain pass, the trucks then had to cover a ten kilometre length of Route 611 that wound past Kajaki Olya before following the bend of the river into FOB Zeebrugge. Despite pleas from the Tajik ANA battalion commander who had earlier chastised the villagers at Kajaki Olya for living in the Middle Ages it was anticipated that the villagers would still attempt to delay the convoy with roadside bombs. A last ditch attempt was made to persuade the villagers to desist attacking the soldiers by offering $25,000 in compensation for the inconvenience of the operation. The greedy elders sprung at this bribe but the hard-line Taliban would have none of it. Following some fraught overnight negotiations a second shura was held and the disappointed elders were forced to inform the British that the deal was off. The convoy would have to fight its way to the dam. There was now also a mounting urgency to complete the delivery of the turbine to prevent imagined groups of Taliban travelling north from Sangin to attack the convoy.

This urgency – and the successful delivery of the $200 million pound project - fell on the shoulders of a captain in his twenties, Liam Fitzgerald-Finch. Captain Fitzgerald-Finch’s unenviable task was to find and defuse the IEDs on Route 611 and to do it quickly. Keeping calm, despite temperatures soaring above 40 degrees, he began the lonely and dangerous task. It was not long before he began to uncover the roadside bombs. Progress slowed and it appeared that the convoy would have to spend another day in the open, vulnerable to attack. Aware of this possibility Fitzgeral-Finch took the bold decision to continue the finger-tip search for IEDs in the dark, a procedure never normally practised because of the self-evident dangers to the bomb disposal operator. In total, thirteen IEDs were found and defused. For this action, Fitzgerald-Finch was awarded the Queen’s Gallantry Medal.

Five days after the convoy set off, the third turbine was finally delivered to Kajaki dam

at 2.30 am on 2 September. The British had taken no chances. Virtually the entire brigade had been employed in some way to undertake Operation Oqab Tsuka and a massive amount of firepower had been expended to deliver Kajaki dam's third turbine. A Canadian soldier was killed by a roadside bomb and a British soldier suffered a crushed pelvis in a road accident. One ANA soldier was electrocuted fishing in the river with an illegally commandeered power cable. It was later claimed that 250 Taliban were killed but this was a gross exaggeration. The convoy did not encounter any determined enemy in its marathon journey and the sheer weight of explosives dropped at Kajaki Olya frightened away local fighters. The main experience for the common soldier had been the sheer boredom of spending hours crawling along the desert plateau clad in heavy body armour and helmet in high temperatures: 'Eating sand for hours on end, sweating my proverbials off with barely enough room to swing a cat' as one sapper remembered.[588] The decision to avoid populated areas and to follow a barely-used desert road had been judicious, if monotonous for the soldiers. To mark the successful delivery of the turbine, a photograph was taken showing the local governor passing under a ribbon held by Afghan soldiers, but this had been, from start to finish, an ISAF operation.

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Operation Oqab Tsuka was unarguably a considerable logistic feat and the MOD spin machine was quick to crow about the epic mission. Barred from actually following the operation on the ground, the media was subsequently invited to report on the event and this encouraged hyperbole. One commanding officer described it as the most significant route clearance operation since the Second World War, ignoring that just over a decade previously British sappers had spent two days clearing thousands of mines to allow the passage of a British armoured division in the first Gulf War. A major who took part in the convoy went further and described it as the most daring and complex operation since the beginning of the war. Another commanding officer, quoted in *The Guardian* claimed that the operation had been undertaken in one of the most heavily mined areas in Afghanistan, which wasn't true. The brigade commander was regrettably quoted in *The Daily Mail* declaring that this operation marked the beginning of the end, inviting the riposte - whose end? Even the Prime Minister gleaned some reflected glory from the operation by publishing an adulatory article in *The Sun*. This ghost-written piece omitted to mention that this was an American-financed operation undertaken against opposition from the FCO, and which only came about as a result of pressure from an increasingly exasperated American ambassador in Kabul.

British self-congratulation was both premature and unjustified. For the villagers living in Kajaki, Operation Oqab Tsuka was another passing storm. They were shelled, mortared and bombed from their homes. Souvenir photographs taken by the paratroopers were noteworthy because of the absence of people or animals. The British had proved as heavy-handed as the Soviets who had previously camped on the heights of Kajaki, at least in the eyes of local villagers. Despite searching fifty compounds and twenty-five bunkers, not a single enemy corpse was found (although some bloody rags were found in one of the bunkers). Just two mortar bombs and one old Chinese rocket were discovered. Within a few days the de facto front line would reassert itself again and the two year old stalemate in Kajaki would be resumed.

The intelligence had been exaggerated and the security weak; the operation had been the biggest open secret in Helmand for weeks. There was no compelling evidence that the Taliban had been deceived or that they had intended to mount a co-ordinated response to block the convoy. A combination of political over-sensitivity and military over-estimation of the risk had served to greatly distort the threat on the ground. More pertinently the delivery of the turbine did not improve the supply of electricity to Helmand or Kandahar Provinces. Following the operation, the project remained stalled because of technical difficulties and a lack of security. Not a single volt of electricity would be added to the power grid.

Operation Oqab Tsuka dominated 16 Air Assault Brigade's tour in Helmand and it was easy to forget that elsewhere the war continued unabated, regardless of the headline-grabbing events at Kajaki.

In Musa Qaleh, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were fighting a constant game of cat and mouse with the local Alizai insurgents. This unit was led by Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Borton who had taken over command of the battalion at short notice after the first commanding officer was wounded in a gun battle. The loss of a commanding officer was itself a noteworthy event – the last time the British Army had suffered such a high ranking casualty was in the Falklands Conflict a quarter of a century earlier. The circumstances of Lieutenant Colonel David Richmond's wounding (he suffered a gun shot wound to the thigh that fractured his femur) were typical of the types of operations which the Jocks undertook during their six month tour as Battlegroup North-West.[589]

Intelligence had been received of a possible Taliban bomb-making factory in a village called Karyeh-ye Kats Sharbat, about eight kilometres north of Musa Qaleh. The village sat at the confluence of a wadi that debouched into the Musa Qaleh River, immediately

west of the prominent mountain known to the troops as ‘Mount Doom’. Mount Doom was over 1,600 metres high and completely dominated the surrounding countryside. It rose steeply from the plain north of Musa Qaleh and its slopes were strewn with large boulders. To approach Karyeh-ye Kats Sharbat from the south meant either channelling troops along a narrow corridor west of the mountain, or detouring around the mountain and approaching from the north. The western approach was too obvious and would be ‘dicked’ by Taliban spotters so Lieutenant Colonel Richmond decided to strike from the north taking the longer approach route around Mount Doom.

To distract attention away from this covert approach, a reinforced platoon of Warriors crewed by B Company of the Highlanders (4 Scots) would be used as bait. The Highlanders were based at FOB Edinburgh about six kilometres to the west of Musa Qaleh. Their task would be to drive north-east, across two wadis and to take covering positions on high ground, on the western bank of the Musa Qaleh River. With their thermal sights they would be able to pick out any movement in the village and provide supporting fire with their 30mm cannons if necessary. Concurrently, an ANA company mentored by the Royal Irish would infiltrate north and test the Taliban reaction. Before the deployment of the western force, D Company of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (5 Scots) would sneak around the back of Mount Doom, at night, in eight Mastiffs, supported by a contingent from 2/7 Marines who were also based at the Musa Qaleh District Centre. Two sections of ANA would accompany this force to show ‘an Afghan face.’

The scheme unfolded according to plan. The combined group of Highlanders and ANA soon became engaged by villagers in Karyeh-ye Kats Sharbat. While this was happening and as dawn broke, D Company approached undetected from the north. As the soldiers neared the outskirts of the village local ‘dickers’ spotted the advancing Jocks and a gun battle erupted. This acted as a cue for the Mastiffs to roll forward like tanks and fire the infantry into the village. With their .50 calibre machine guns and 30mm grenade launchers they laid down an impressive weight of fire. D Company advanced quickly into the village and the gunmen fled. As invariably happened in these assaults the Jocks were then shot at by villagers using the warren of alleys in the village as cover. The reported bomb-making factory proved to be false information – nothing of significance was found. After several hours clearing compounds and becoming engaged in random gun battles the decision was taken to sweep north through the village and flush out any remaining gunmen.

To communicate his orders, Lieutenant Colonel Richmond had to walk to a cemetery on high ground west of the village where some US marines had taken up a fire position.

The Bowman radios had failed again and the only way to guarantee the passage of his orders was to return to World War One-style communications using runners or communicating the orders in person. It was while he was standing on this hillock explaining the next phase of the operation that Lieutenant Colonel Richmond was shot in the leg. The call ‘Sunray is down’ (‘Sunray’ is the radio codeword for commander) electrified the British force. In Normandy the life expectancy of an infantry commanding officer was a matter of a few weeks. To post-war generations of soldiers the loss of a commanding officer was a rarity and novelty. The operation was aborted and Lieutenant Colonel Richmond was duly evacuated to Camp Bastion field hospital, in pain but alive. The severity of the fracture was such that Richmond would require two years of rehabilitation. Moved by this experience, he subsequently became a champion for wounded soldiers.

The Argyll’s Commanding Officer had been felled by a stray, long range shot. Many of the gun fights experienced by the Jocks were much more close range and ‘personal’. At the age of 24, Lieutenant James Adamson, had already earned a Mentioned in Despatches for demonstrating coolness under enemy fire. In early October, as the brigade was preparing to hand-over to the marines, his platoon once again found itself involved in heavy fighting. Separated from his sections and with only a mortar fire controller and interpreter as cover, he began to negotiate a shallow stream to rejoin his troops when two gunmen appeared five metres in front of the group and opened fire with a machine gun. Miraculously the insurgents missed the startled British soldiers. Acting on instinct, Lieutenant Adamson bayonet charged the gunmen. For this ‘supreme physical courage’ Adamson was awarded the Military Cross.

Another action, for which a Corporal Shaun Whitehead was also awarded a Military Cross, was typical of dozens of such encounters north and south of Musa Qaleh in the contested Green Zone. Whitehead had been leading his section towards an area believed to be occupied by a number of Taliban. The maize crop was fully grown at this time of the year, reaching well over the height of a fully grown man, and it was easy to become cut-off and disorientated. One soldier would describe it as submarine warfare with both sides trying to detect each other from the giveaway rustles and whispers. Climbing a bank he spotted three gunmen emerging from a compound and immediately gave chase. Three rifles and a radio were recovered. The three men alerted their companions and it was not long before the whole platoon was under attack. In the confusion Corporal Whitehead’s section became separated and was in danger of being overrun. The prominent antennae on his back became a magnet for the insurgent fire. Heedless of his safety he rallied the

section and exposed himself to enemy fire to loose off a rocket towards his assailants. The section returned back to base safely having enacted a vignette that was being replayed up and down the Green Zone that summer. Like the Royal Irish, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders would quit the province having suffered only one fatality, a Lance-Corporal James Johnson, killed not at Musa Qaleh but at Lashkar Gah manning a checkpoint. The Jocks proved far cannier than their opponents.

Over the course of the summer the British would incur over twenty-five fatalities in Helmand's Green Zone, the majority suffered by 2 Para patrols operating from FOBs Gibraltar and Inkerman. Among the dead was Lance Corporal Kenneth Rowe, an Army dog handler who had volunteered to remain at FOB Inkerman to support a 2 Para search task. He had been due to leave the besieged base the day before he died. He was killed, alongside the search dog Sasha, when they were caught by an RPG rocket. By one of those curious, dark coincidences, the military working dog should not have been there either as it belonged to another handler but had been borrowed by Rowe. Loyalty to the fallen was extended to this canine servant. When it was discovered in the confusion of the casualty evacuation (conducted in darkness) that Sasha had been left behind, a second patrol was mounted to recover the lifeless dog.

These casualty figures – which at the time seemed shocking – contrasted sharply with those of 3 Para, the sister parachute battalion commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Huw Williams, deployed to Kandahar as the theatre reserve. 3 Para had been the popular heroes of Operation Herrick 4. More books had been written about this battalion than any other unit in the British Army, causing a predictable rush of young men keen to join 3 Para to collect some of this reflected glory. The new recruits found the action they craved, but what was striking about 3 Para's tour of southern Afghanistan in the summer of 2008 was that the battalion did not suffer a single fatality, and only suffered four wounded in action.

The reasons for the remarkably low casualty rate were twofold. First, it must be conceded that the battalion largely encountered weak and even non-existent opposition. But second, while the sister 2 Para was dispersed and mired in static, attrition warfare, 3 Para was concentrated and engaged in mobile warfare. The results spoke for themselves. 3 Para displayed the highest operational tempo of any unit in 16 Air Assault Brigade and suffered the least number of casualties. The same would be true of every British battalion that took on the role of the theatre reserve until the outgoing Labour government ended this commitment in the autumn of 2009. It was one of the perverse aspects of the war in Helmand that the single approach that was yielding the most success – if success could be

measured crudely by the number of operations undertaken against casualties incurred – was the one approach that was not (or could not be) exploited by the British. If the British had stuck to their own doctrine of 'the manoeuvrist approach', or more plainly a philosophy of mobile warfare, the statistics suggest their casualties would have numbered in the tens, not the hundreds.

Like the Gurkhas before them, 3 Para discovered that what really mattered was the quality of the intelligence. The paratroopers were adept at mounting air assault operations and catching the Taliban by surprise. But if the intelligence was weak, it amounted to chasing phantoms in the hills.

The first operation mounted by 3 Para illustrated this and other frustrations of the spiralling war in southern Afghanistan. It was called Operation Sohil Laram III (the number itself was a poor omen as the preceding two had achieved nothing), and the aim was to secure a town called Hutal by building a base near the district centre. A secondary aim was to disrupt Taliban gangs in the district of Band-e Timor.[590] The governor, a man named Haji Zaifullah, proved to be obstructive towards the British and corrupt. A Company, tasked to sweep for insurgents south-east of the town, ended up searching empty compounds. B Company discovered that the main complaint of the local tribes was the corruption of the ANP, who were in the pay of the governor. Reconstruction work initiated by the paratroopers was beset by problems. The governor manipulated contracts, hijacked workers on his properties, and charged illegal taxes on trucks. The realities of business in Afghanistan were proving impervious to the paratrooper's best intentions. An American special force raid – about which the British knew nothing – provoked significant anger which was directed at the paratroopers. Zaifullah would eventually be sacked but at a cost to relations with the governor of Kandahar, Asadullah Khalid, who was secretly backing him. Eventually, in late April, the paratroopers quit Hutal, handing over to a Portuguese company that got roaring drunk on its first night at the newly built base. Desperate for some compensation the British would describe Operation Sohil Laram III as a relative success but the truth was that it was more a farce. Later in the war, an American unit would also try to 'fix' Hutal, and similarly get nowhere, defeated by the corruption and tribal politics.

Released from holding Hutal, 3 Para was subsequently committed to Operation Sur Kor ('Red House'), a raid designed to catch a prominent Taliban bomb-maker named Haji Sultan Agha.[591] Agha lived in Zhari district, near the Arghandab River, in an area rich in vineyards. Three compounds were identified as potential targets, codenamed Gold, Silver

and Bronze. Opting for a bold, daylight helicopter assault on top of the objectives, the operation, like the previous mission, also descended into farce. The landing sites proved to be knee-deep in mud. There was no IED factory in Objective Gold, just the usual piles of drying marijuana. The other two compounds simply contained women and children. The intelligence had proved badly wrong. As invariably happened on these operations, the presence of Western troops eventually provoked gun fire. On this occasion it seemed to come from the north and west. The paratroopers duly spent the next four hours clearing a bunker that was empty, and a compound that was also empty. The sum total reward for all this effort was the discovery of discarded RPG launcher. As the paratroopers prepared to leave in the late afternoon they were seen off with some parting shots from local farmers.

Following Sur Kor, 3 Para was committed to Operation Oqab Sterga, the operation described earlier in this chapter, which was notable not so much for poor intelligence as exaggerated intelligence. The greatest threat proved not to be insurgents, who dispersed as soon as the paratroopers entered the Green Zone, but legacy Russian mines. Over two days, the open-top WMIKs on which the paratroopers were riding struck five Russian mines and they were extremely fortunate to suffer only one serious casualty.[592] At the conclusion of the operation a new base – FOB Attal – was built, but the insurgents would simply re-infiltrate this part of the Upper Gereshk Valley which remained deeply hostile to the presence of foreign soldiers. Attal turned out to be the last patrol base handed over to the ANSF in the winter of 2012. At the time of handover, there was a shooting or IED incident every other day. The insurrection was never quelled.

From Helmand, 3 Para was catapulted to Zabul Province to take part in Operation Janub Zilzila (‘Southern Edge’) in a Romanian area of operations. This operation was depressingly reminiscent to some of the wild goose chases which the Gurkhas had been sent on in the mountainous areas north of Kandahar. The target in this case was a settlement called Mizan which the Americans believed was harbouring IED factories. Instead, what the paratroopers discovered was a moonscape, widespread poverty and backwardness. It was also clear that the Taliban effectively governed the area (only one of eight districts had a government-appointed official) and the local tribesmen were extremely reluctant to engage with the British for fear of retribution. Over the next three weeks, before the operation was cancelled, the paratroopers became engaged in numerous gun battles, none of which was conclusive and most of which ended up with the local tribesmen breaking off after one of their number had been killed by the superior fire the British could muster. No IED factories were discovered although a mid-ranking Taliban

commander named Mullah Sadullah was captured, more by luck than judgement. This capture could not disguise the pointlessness of such operations which did little more than stir local feelings and create even more enemies.

Before the end of the tour 3 Para would deploy to Kandahar City following the Sarposa prison break; reinforce 2 Para in FOBs Inkerman and Gibraltar; undertake two more air assault raids; and participate in the operation to deliver the third turbine to Kajaki Dam. With the exception of the latter, nobody could pretend that these separate operations had yielded any great successes. The first raid in the deep south of Helmand was again based on poor intelligence and proved a waste of time. The second, against a narco-baron named Mullah Multan, missed its quarry.

If Brigadier Carleton-Smith's wish had been realised none of this military action would have been necessary. His brigade had deployed to Helmand to assist in the spread of governance and to allow reconstruction: this was the message he had promoted on his many unit visits. How was this crucial pillar of the British 'comprehensive approach' faring, two years after the first paratroopers arrived in Helmand?

According to DfID, around £23.7 million had now been spent on reconstruction in Helmand since 2006, out of a total commitment of £30 million. This represented less than five per cent of pledged British aid to Afghanistan.[593] The money, wherever it was being spent, was not following the bullets. The 'comprehensive approach' – at least in Helmand where British soldiers were now dying at an alarming rate – was a sham. This sum represented a tiny fraction of the money being made by farmers through the cultivation of the opium poppy. In 2006 UNODC estimated the total farm gate value of opium production in Afghanistan at $0.76 billion. In the subsequent two years it grew again. Given the massive financial odds stacked against the British reconstruction effort, was there any chance of success? This lack of commitment over aid and reconstruction was reflected nationwide. Compared to European countries like Kosovo and Bosnia, with a fraction of the populations of Afghanistan, aid per capita remained extremely modest.

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By 2008, ninety-eight civilians and forty-eight military personnel were working in Civil Military Cooperation (CIMIC) at the Lashkar Gah PRT. Over the next twelve months the renamed Civil Stabilisation Unit, commonly recruiting ex-military personnel rather than civil servants, would swell to 140 strong based at Lashkar Gah and five other locations. The military Construction and Supervision Cell (CSC) remained small – just

five soldiers – and district centres relied on their own Development and Influence Teams, or DITs. To counter mounting criticism, British government departments like DfID listed reconstruction successes in Helmand on their websites. The long lists of wells dug, schools repainted and mosques repaired drew a sceptical response. Part of the problem was that embedded journalists were discovering a quite different reality to that portrayed by DfID.

One such journalist was Anthony Loyd, working for *The Times*. He visited Musa Qaleh in the summer of 2008, then being held up as a model of British reconstruction (based on American funds), and wrote a critical report on what he uncovered. It had taken seven months for a civilian stabilisation advisor to be posted to Musa Qaleh. Much of the reconstruction money had been squandered on 'bungs, bribes and embezzlement'. The biggest scam was multiple sub-contracting, invariably between tribal or family members, with each sub-contractor taking a cut but not actually providing a service. About £100,000 was donated towards asphalting the main bazaar road in Musa Qaleh and within a few months it was filled with cracks and potholes due to the poor workmanship (this project, incidentally, was justified on the grounds that it would improve health and safety in Musa Qaleh). A further £115,000 was donated towards refurbishing the main clinic in the town but it remained unused because there was no running water or electricity. The lack of electricity remained a significant complaint (echoing the problems the British faced in Basra). Under the Taliban, electricity had been rationed to alternate days. Now that the British were back the town was receiving a few hours of reliable supply every four days. The destroyed mosque had still not been rebuilt. The much vaunted Cash for Works program (which was actually paying a lower daily rate than the Taliban were offering their fighters) collapsed after the corrupt contractor failed to present satisfactory accounts. How many locals were actually employed on this scheme and where the money went would never be determined with any certainty. Mullah Salaam, Karzai's appointee governor was actively siphoning off some of the reconstruction money, as were his unpaid policemen.

One of the favourite statistics quoted by DfID was the number of re-opened schools (the school at Musa Qaleh closed by the Taliban would be restored to its proper use). But the bald statistics – fifty-nine schools were reportedly functioning in Helmand in the summer of 2008 - barely told the truth.[594] The Helmand provincial council told a visiting group of Members of Parliament that there had actually been over 200 schools *before* the British arrived. It had been the fighting that had provoked the closure of schools, not Taliban opposition to education.[595] A veneer of reconstruction based on misleading

statistics was constantly being drip fed creating a false picture of British aid efforts in Helmand province. These efforts were not, to be fair, without some results: the funds disbursed in the province since 2006 provided for £5 million in grants for local projects including 332 micro-finance loans, commonly the most productive use of aid money. DfID's Helmand Agriculture and Rural Development Programme, and the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development's (MRDD) National Solidarity Program (NSP) both seemed to be enjoying better success.[596] The soldiers, however, remained sceptical. One remarked to Loyd: 'They wouldn't know how to pour piss from a boot if the instructions were on the heel. That's the PRT'.

Perhaps as concerning was the lack of any suggestion that DfID's attitudes to working in Afghanistan had changed. When the House of Commons International Development Committee delivered its fourth report on reconstruction in Afghanistan, one of the hot topics discussed was the paucity of social life in Kabul, which implied that DfID staff needed more leave periods in Britain to recuperate from this unfortunate deprivation.[597] A view was offered that:

'Since the attacks on foreign targets near the DFID houses in November 2007 and on the Serena Hotel in January 2008, the opportunities for social life outside the Embassy have been severely curtailed. This has impacted on the opportunities staff have to get "down time". In this climate, it is judged that it would not be appropriate to extend the length of the work/breather break cycle beyond six weeks on, two weeks off.'

If a soldier with no hope of 'social life' in hotels had been present in the committee room, one can only imagine what verbal volley might have been offered when this judgement was entered in the records.

More measured but no less critical assessments began to appear in army studies. A paper produced by a Lieutenant Colonel Slay, that summer, at the Defence College in Shrivenham, was typical of this growing body of opinion.[598] Reconstruction in Afghanistan had been stitched together in a series of ad hoc and stove-piped national initiatives. Coordination was poor or entirely absent. The involvement of the Afghan government in the reconstruction effort varied wildly between commands – major donors like the US were mostly bypassing the Kabul government. NGOs viewed ISAF as an 'anathema' and the military viewed civilian aid organizations with equal distrust. Helmand, he noted with a degree of understatement was 'far from benign' and NGOs were 'noticeable by their absence'. The British comprehensive approach was 'developing

slowly' and it could take decades to before a 'mission success' could be declared, a commitment that no British government could countenance. He concluded that 'convincing the Afghans that their own government, backed by the international community, is a much better option than the Taliban or a feudal system is proving to be a complex task'. This barely expressed the scale of the problem now facing the British in Helmand. Other studies concluded that the 'ink spot strategy' had been a failure.[599] Ordinary Helmandis viewed aid as favouring the usual elites, exacerbating the difference between the haves and the have-nots. The Quick Impact Projects had followed a scatter gun approach. Consent Winning Activities had failed to win consent. Most notably, the failure to spread security had heavily distorted British reconstruction. The majority of funds had actually been spent where least needed, in Lashkar Gah (105 projects costing $14.2 million). In a volatile town like Sangin, just $368,000 had been spent on six projects all in the immediate vicinity of FOB Jackson, benefitting practically no one.[600] After two years, there was little to show despite the roll call of 'success statistics'.

The failure of British reconstruction in Helmand province was amplified by a self-defeating stinginess on the part of some civil servants entrusted with running important programs. One such program was the Helmand PTS ('*Proceay-e Tahkeem-e Solha*', or Peace and Reconciliation Commission). This was studied by the academic and defence advisor Matt Waldeman who interviewed a number of former Taliban. He discovered that the total budget for the Helmand PTS was $600 *a month*. Fighters who agreed to reconcile were being offered 150 Afghanis, or about three dollars. This derisory amount was much less than the daily wage offered by the insurgency, and as Waldeman observed, this barely covered their travelling costs. Far from providing an inducement to reconciliation Waldeman concluded that the Helmand PTS was perceived as a great insult:

'Given the importance of *eftekhar* or *namus* (honour/dignity) and *sharm* (shame) in Pashtun culture, core insurgents are unlikely to reintegrate unless they can do so with a degree of honour and respectability.'[601]

In answer to a Freedom of Information request by a television broadcaster, it transpired that the British had admitted to causing 104 civilian deaths and that $200,000 had been disbursed in various compensation payments in the last 18 months to bereaved relatives.[602] These statistics also barely told the story. A British officer working in the Lashkar Gah PRT was appalled to discover that it was taking weeks for compensation claims to be honoured for killed relatives resulting in the pitiful sight of beggarly widows returning day after day in the vain hope of receiving some compensation. Another commanding officer

was horrified that a family which had lost eight relatives in an air strike was told to return in forty-five days to claim a payment, while at the same time 'BGs can waste £69,000 at will firing Javelin missiles at the behest of a JNCO'.[603] The amounts being paid out just added insult to the injury of the bureaucratic foot-dragging. The basic minimum cost of the life of a woman accidentally killed by British military action was set at £127 (it paid to be killed by American forces, literally, as compensation was set at $2,500, far more even than the Taliban were paying the families of suicide bomb volunteers). This stinginess, curiously, had precedent in Northern Ireland. To give one example, when two young men, Seamus Cusack and Desmond Beattie were shot and killed by British troops in the course of a riot in Londonderry in July 1971, their relatives received just £415 in compensation, after a four year wait.[604]

By mid-2009 the British government would admit to paying out around 200 such claims in Afghanistan (a total of 333 civilians were eventually killed by British operations in Afghanistan). Given the small amounts of compensation being disbursed (amounting to much less than the average ammunition expenditure of a platoon in a morning's gun battle) it seemed unfathomable that bureaucracy was not waved aside. By the summer of that year the task force had been re-supplied with 198,000 rounds of .50 cal, 2,370,400 rounds of 5.56mm, 2,233,800 rounds of 7.62mm as well as a staggering 38,868 81mm mortar bombs.[605] The cost of this ammunition ran into tens of millions of pounds. A petty concern over paying out false claims seemed to override the immense damage that civil servant parsimony was creating to the perceptions of bereaved Helmandis, leaving aside the physical damage left behind in the wake of military operations.

The experience of two senior NCOs working in Gereshk was typical of the frustrations being experienced all across Helmand in reconstruction efforts. When Staff Sergeant Davidson and Sergeant Needham set up a registration clinic in the town to collect names of potential contractors and tradesmen they were bemused to find that 'first at the door was the Mayor of Gereshk's son to register as a mechanic; no pressure from dad there then!'. Eventually they did register nine bona fide contractors but the two soldiers honestly conceded that this was a 'pebble thrown in the pond in terms of reconstruction and development progress in Gereshk, Helmand Province'.

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Corruption, as ever, remained a problem. The day after the two NCOs held their registration clinic an operation involving soldiers from the Royal Horse Artillery and 23

Engineer Regiment netted over 100,000 rounds and forty-seven RPGs with their warheads. Amongst the booty was a stash of police uniforms (the cache was found in a house very close to the main police station in Gereshk). The suspicion was that corrupt members of the ANP knew all along about the existence of the cache because they were moonlighting as insurgents. A week later at the Bost Hotel in Lashkar Gah – the town's only hotel that adjoined the governor's home – an inaugural Helmand contractors conference was held attended by sixty-one Afghans representing fifty-five construction companies. This conference would lead to over thirty local projects supervised by the Royal Engineers but again the honest soldiers admitted that the 'projects do not translate into support or create significant employment'. This candour from the soldiers contrasted sharply with the spin offered by DfID.

It was a credit to the spirit of the British Army that such disappointments did not translate into dead cynicism. Soldiers were genuinely moved by the routine poverty in Helmand. The sentiment that the British Army was doing some good was commonly expressed. When Lieutenant Alison Macdonald working at the Joint District Coordination Cell in Gereshk visited the town's only school for girls she was stirred by the reception she received:

'The warmth of the greeting from staff and students was palpable; I was treated like royalty with two bunches of flowers and an offer of a most welcome cold drink. The setup for the visit was an open forum and on arriving in the room I went round and shook the hands of all the female teachers and a selection of the students, and they were all so welcoming and friendly. This was their opportunity to have their say and outline what we might be able to do for them. Their requests were so simple ranging from – fans and fridges, soap and shampoo and milk for the youngest children. All things that we accept as normal but items that can make such a difference to their lives. They were particularly pleased to see a female visiting the school, and to have the opportunity to meet and talk to a female officer was a novelty.'[606]

It was experiences like this that offered some recompense in the otherwise daily round of frustrations.

For Brigadier Carleton-Smith, these small victories could not hide the larger and much grimmer picture. As the six month deployment neared its end, the brigade's assessment of the situation was sober and realistic. At this rate, the entire British campaign in Helmand

was heading for failure. The brigade had managed to hold the ring, but to what purpose as there was no obvious military outcome to the insurgency. Carleton-Smith went further: the Taliban could not be beaten by military force alone and it was unlikely that the movement would accept any form of negotiation as long as a single Western soldier was present in Afghanistan. Britain was being faced with the prospect of a long-term military campaign in a harsh and difficult environment which could, conceivably, dribble on for years. Did anyone seriously believe that a British electorate would tolerate such a sacrifice for a war that the public neither understood nor fully supported? Would a British government stand 'a long war'? According to the brigade's calculations thirty soldiers had been killed and 154 had been wounded in action. This implied that one in fifteen soldiers had been wounded and one in eighty had been killed. From this total, 81 per cent of the casualties had been caused by IEDs (an average of four incidents daily). This did not compare with First World War casualty rates where one in eight soldiers had been killed and one in three wounded, but for an army rudely jolted from more sedate peace-keeping of recent experience, these were nonetheless alarming numbers.[607]

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The list of failures was long. With the exception of Governor Gulab Mangal, there was no credible governance across the province. Reconstruction projects were too small and too slow. As one general candidly stated that summer, 'The problem is that DfID do not see themselves as part of our foreign policy'.[608] A senior DfID official himself confessed that 'we don't do bricks and mortar', but did not elaborate what exactly DfID did do.[609] Counter-narcotics initiatives were failing badly. The Afghan narcotics trade had reaped its biggest harvest to date. Over the 2007-08 season it was estimated that the country produced a whopping 8,200 tons of raw opium.[610] The enemy had become more adept and more deadly. There was still an inherent tension between the ISAF mission that sought to widen the presence of Western soldiers and the British impulse to remain in situ and 'deepen' the mission. Task Force 42 had perhaps killed half a dozen Taliban commanders including two key IED facilitators called Bishmullah and Sadiqullah, but these targeted killings were making no real impact on the overall war. The latest American special force group, Task Force 71, was also making its presence felt, but not always in helpful ways. The improvised explosive device was threatening to become the battle-winning weapon of the war. As the paratroopers returned to their home base in Colchester they echoed their brigadier's misgivings: if the blokes in a year's time were still fighting over the same hedgerows in the Green Zone, a sergeant major told a television crew, then the whole war

was a waste of time. The Taliban, far from being beaten, were getting stronger and better at the game. As one section commander who had taken part in the battles of 2006 observed:

'This tour as a whole has been much riskier than the last time. HERRICK 4 was nothing compared to this. Every contact has been more intense. The Taliban have been far more accurate, professional and determined. I guess the stupid ones are all dead.'[611]

The 2008 campaign had been bloody and it was reflected in the operational honours. There were twenty-three gallantry awards including sixteen Military Crosses. A total of fifty-nine soldiers were Mentioned in Despatches.[612] If there was a certain regimental rivalry then the race was between the Parachute Regiment and the Royal Irish Regiment. The paratroopers picked up twenty gallantry awards overtaking the Ulstermen who bagged sixteen awards including the only three Conspicuous Gallantry Crosses of the tour. A George Medal was awarded to a bomb disposal operator, Staff Sergeant Stuart Dickson, who collected nearly forty IEDs at mortal risk to himself, rather than undertaking the safer procedure of destroying them remotely, to better understand the construction of these improvised bombs. The intelligence gleaned from this selfless courage proved invaluable.

Many of the bravery awards were won trying to rescue stricken comrades in the treacherous Green Zone. Frontline medical personnel – as always in wars – shared the risks. Some were extraordinarily lucky. Corporal Neil McKenzie, a Royal Army Medical Corps combat medic, had already served three years with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders when the battalion was posted to Afghanistan. Early in the tour he was caught by an IED strike and was thrown clean from his vehicle suffering shrapnel wounds and temporary deafness. His injuries were sufficiently serious for him to have chosen the easy route of aero-evacuation to Britain. He elected instead to remain with his battalion and in the second half of the tour was again caught in a massive bomb blast that cracked his body armour. Miraculously he survived experiencing only temporary paralysis as a result of the blast.[613]

The fighting in the Green Zone demanded outstanding leadership. It was perhaps unsurprising that three Parachute Regiment company commanders, including both company commanders who served at FOB Inkerman, would be awarded Military Crosses. Ordinary soldiers took great risks for each other. Early in the tour a platoon from 3 Para found itself probing a known Taliban position south of Sangin in the Upper Gereshk Valley. The area was known to be littered with Soviet mines, which is why the Taliban

used it to snipe at British troops, trying to draw them into the minefield. In this particular encounter the predictable happened. A vehicle struck a mine flipping it over and injuring all three paratroopers. Two of the injured paratroopers managed to crawl out of the stricken vehicle but a third seriously injured soldier remained trapped underneath the vehicle. Disregarding his own safety, Corporal William Owen set off over 300 metres of minefield to reach the wounded men and tend to their wounds. For this act of bravery he was awarded the Queen's Gallantry Medal.[614]

Some gallantry medals were awarded for a peculiarly British sense of bloody-mindedness that thrives against impossible odds. Typical of this spirit was a Royal Engineer, Captain Russell Archer, who threw away his spade and picked up a rifle to defend a remote outpost in Nawa District, just south of Lashkar Gah. Captain Archer was sent with a seven man section to bolster an ANA platoon in a house which had been taken over as a patrol base. The task was only meant to last two days. Instead, the team found themselves besieged for a month by dozens of gunmen. Like a latter-day Gordon of Khartoum, Captain Archer stayed put even though his food supplies ran out and his Bowman radios packed up. Even when the besieged men began to take casualties he remained in the pock-marked building refusing to surrender this little piece of British resistance. In one attack the building was subjected to a sustained three hour hail of fire with bullets cracking through the rooms. Over a two week period the insurgents made nine attempts to overrun the building.[615] Captain Archer's steadfastness was not just a measure of his personal courage. It was also a measure of just how beleaguered and stretched the British task force had become. The siege of the platoon houses, which had marked the initial British deployment, was still being played out two years on.

CHAPTER 8
SERVING IN HELL-LAND

Major Paddy Sherrard, a gunner serving with 19 Regiment Royal Artillery, summed up the journey that 140,000 British servicemen and women would take to Helmand over the course of the war:

'A military move is like being on a long conveyor belt: you know when and where you get on it, but don't necessarily know where you will end up, nor how long the journey will take.''[616]

Soldiers are used to being treated like human freight, but even by the normal standards of military transportation, just getting to Afghanistan from scattered home bases in mainland Britain and elsewhere almost always proved a gruelling experience that rudely ushered in the personal transition from garrison life, to the gypsy existence of soldiering on operations. Nobody pretended that land-locked Afghanistan was an easy country to reach but British soldiers at the beginning of the 21st century could still be dismayed by how much more difficult movements and transport staff seemed to make that long journey.

Lance Corporal Preston was a young Sapper serving with 23 Engineer Regiment (Air Assault) in the spring of 2008. His journey was typical of the two day ordeal travelling from barracks in Britain to Camp Bastion:

'We left Rock Barracks late evening on Tuesday 12th March to start our long journey to Afghanistan. We got to South Cerny [sic], near Cirencester and went through the usual safety brief then checked in. We had some scoff then got bussed to RAF Brize Norton for our flight…The flight was long and most people slept all the way, others listen to there [sic] Gucci Ipods or MP3 players. It was late Wednesday night when we arrived in Kandahar Everyone was tired, but the travelling wasn't over, just our transfers to Camp Bastion remained. We were spread across three Hercs and flown to Camp Bastion, with the last arriving at 0330hrs Thursday… then shown to our accommodation for some much needed sleep.''[617]

A year later, a sapper colleague based in Germany would endure an equally arduous journey:

‘In good old Army tradition, the coach trip was to take some of the Regiment back to the UK so we could fly back over Germany en route to Afghanistan… Finally we reached Camp Bastion at 0430hrs on the Monday morning after 32 hours of travelling by land and air over land and sea. Good times.’[618]

A raft of regulations and interminable health and safety briefs only compounded the irritation endured by soldiers going to war.

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At the beginning of the campaign, an air bridge was the only viable way of transferring men and materials to Helmand. The problem facing the military planners was: how do you do it with insufficient aircraft and without a graded runway anywhere close to your area of operations? When the British began planning their mission to Helmand in 2005, the closest working airport was the American-built Kandahar Air Base, known as KAF, about 150 kilometres east of where they wanted to be. In military parlance this was the nearest APOD or Air Point of Disembarkation. American ground forces had occupied the dilapidated air base soon after the collapse of the Taliban regime (Osama bin Laden’s Tarnak farm complex was only half an hour’s drive away). A Canadian unit then assumed occupancy. In the intervening years it had become the home for a small number of strike aircraft and helicopters (including a handful of British Harriers), transiting special force units and a guard force. An RAF Regiment force protection party occupied the building where the Taliban had made their last stand – appropriately nicknamed ‘the TLS building’. As KAF swelled to over 30,000 strong, it gained a reputation as ‘slipper city’. At the height of operations, KAF handled 5,000 flights per week and was the permanent home to 300 aircraft of various types, making it the busiest single runway in the world. There was still a danger of unexploded ordnance in the environs of the base and the environmental pollution caused by the Soviet tenancy, compounded by Afghan neglect, was evident everywhere. Four RAF Regiment Senior Aircraftsmen – Christopher Bridge, Graham Livingstone, Gary Thompson, and Luke Southgate – would lose their lives to IEDs from 2007 to 2010. Taliban rocket attacks were largely ineffectual, although in November 2005 one rocket caused £20million’s worth of damage to three Harrier GR.7 (one was damaged beyond repair). Over a four year period there were almost 200 such attacks, but less than 10 per cent caused casualties. To put this in perspective, around twenty-five UAVs were also lost in crashes, without the intervention of the Taliban (Bastion alone would report

thirteen crashes by 2012).[619] The insurgent threat always remained relatively low in what was the most comfortable of all the ISAF bases in south-west Afghanistan. Where else could you order cappuccinos and ice creams?

The only usable runway in Helmand was at the deceptively named Bost Airport, located about one kilometre south of the town centre in Lashkar Gah. Bost Airport had also been a Russian air base, used mostly by helicopters and transport aircraft. The airport had been surrounded by earth bunds and a barbed wire fence. A small number of temporary buildings had been erected. When the Russians left, this infrastructure was destroyed. Protective minefields were never cleared making parts of the airport hazardous. From the air, the outlines of the Russian parking bays, taxiways and hangars could be still be seen, protruding through the sand and gravel desert that had reclaimed the base. From the ground, Bost Airport was barely distinguishable from the surrounding countryside. Running north to south through the old airport was a single 2,000 metre gravel runway. The ‘control tower’ was a run-down, one-storey building without reliable electricity or running water. When the RAF attempted to land a C-130 at this airstrip (reportedly carrying special force soldiers and buckets of cash), the aircraft appeared to detonate an old mine, or possibly a deliberately planted IED, causing the loss of the aircraft and its precious cargo. The experiment was not repeated and Bost Airport would have to wait until 2009 before the runway was finally asphalted, by the Americans. The only other runway in central Helmand was the single runway constructed by Royal Engineers, at Camp Bastion. This ‘expeditionary runway’ was suitable for medium transport aircraft like the C-130 but required upgrading to accept larger aircraft.

The lack of a local air base infrastructure was only one half of the problem facing the Air staffs. The RAF faced serious problems supporting an operation in Helmand because a succession of defence cuts had left it without a credible, strategic transport fleet (the second Wilson government dealt the mortal blow, chopping the fleet by over half to stop the generals from getting ideas in their heads over conducting operations ‘east of Suez’). As one disgruntled officer put it: ‘While men in suits are arguing over pathetic amounts of money we have to move heaven and earth to patch together vintage aircraft.’[620]

The surviving rump of the RAF’s strategic transport fleet was indeed pathetic. 216 Squadron ran nine ex-British Airways and Pan Am TriStars that were almost thirty years old. These aircraft inevitably required extensive maintenance and were dual-roled as air to air refuellers. Just three aircraft were used to transport passengers, but these were not reliably available (after 2007, they more or less became obsolete, and in 2013 they were

finally retired). 101 Squadron ran an even older fleet of VC-10s, also converted to the air to air refuel role. None of these aircraft could be used in the transport role. The last unit, 10 Squadron, which had also been flying VC-10s, was disbanded in 2005. The last VC-10 (XR-808) was finally retired after forty-seven years' service in the summer of 2013, and sent to a museum in Bruntingthorpe Aerodrome, where it more properly belonged. In the late 1960s the RAF had managed a fleet of around 200 strategic transport aircraft – it now had three.

The crisis became so acute following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 that four C-17A Globemasters were leased from the United States. These were being flown by 99 Squadron and were working flat out supporting the continuing operation in southern Iraq. The rude fact was that the down-sized RAF could not support an air bridge to south-west Afghanistan. The only feasible way the British could sustain a military operation in Helmand was through civilian charter flights. This meant long journeys via transit airports in the Middle East, before taking onward flights to Kandahar Air Base. At Kandahar Air Base the troops could then be ferried in RAF C-130s to Camp Bastion.

In 2006 the RAF re-organised into American-style 'Expeditionary Air Wings', to better support Operations Telic and Herrick. The reorganisation could not hide the fact that the vital element of these 'agile, adaptable and scaleable' military organisations, to use the euphemistic jargon, was in fact the civil air industry. The RAF could no longer run an expeditionary war except with the assistance of civilian airlines. To give one example, between February 2007 and October 2008, Britain's war in Afghanistan was only possible thanks to the contracting of 613 civilian aircraft.[621] Civilian contract did not necessarily imply a better service. Airport delays and groundings affected these military chartered flights as much as normal civil flights. For the majority this meant 'painful' stays in RAF transit accommodation. On rare occasions the chartered airlines were faced with a contractual obligation to accommodate the soldiers in hotels. When C Company of the Black Watch (3 Scots) was delayed at Edinburgh Airport due to adverse weather they were put up in a 4 star hotel. On their last night of freedom the delighted Jocks managed to rack up a £14,000 bill which included a lobster dinner.

After finally arriving at Camp Bastion, and being allowed to catch up on sleep, the soldiers would begin their RSOI or Receipt, Staging and Onward Integration. This leaden acronym meant training. At the beginning of the war, RSOI perhaps lasted two days and included some range work and briefs on the tactical situation. By the end of the war, RSOI had swelled into an eight-day 'death by PowerPoint' ordeal. When the time taken to

deploy to Helmand was accounted, this implied that some units were taking over a month to arrive in theatre and prepare themselves for operations. Mid-tour Rest and Recuperation (R&R) could swallow another month (due to the lack of helicopters and the problem of co-ordinating chartered flights) and the recovery of a unit back to Britain could also take a month. For some soldiers, a six month tour of duty in Afghanistan actually amounted to about four months. One third of the time could simply be spent in transit from one place to the next. This was a debilitating waste of manpower the British could ill-afford. Despite strong arguments that six month tours were seriously undermining the British war effort, the system was essentially retained for the duration of the war. The unwillingness to countenance long tours would have surprised old soldiers. Half a century earlier, a battalion of the Suffolk Regiment served a straight three year tour fighting insurgents in Malaya. This was considered normal. Its modern successor – 1 Royal Anglian – served six months in Helmand.

Camp Bastion on initial impressions was a vast, confusing military base stuck in the middle of the desert. Over time, it would expand into the biggest settlement by circumference in Helmand occupying over thirty-five square kilometres and housing over 20,000 soldiers and civilians. When combined with Kandahar Air Base, this implied that some 50,000 servicemen and contractors were deployed in just two bases. This was manpower that never or seldom ventured ‘outside the wire’; that never fired a shot in anger; or saw a frontline. There was undeniably a cost to the modern, exponential growth in the size of headquarters and rear echelon staffs. In the Vietnam War, such troops had been dismissively known as the ‘Saigon Commandos’, but even Westmoreland’s command of half a million men, only produced around 36,000 such REMFs (or ‘Rear Echelon Motherfuckers’ as they were also known). In south-west Afghanistan, the imbalance of frontline soldier to base rat was plain to anyone with an abacus.

In addition to the original encampment, more bases would spring up or grow: the ANA Camp Shorabak and the US marine base, Camp Leatherneck. An Afghan shanty town would grow alongside the vast military complex, feeding the ravenous maw of the military machine. Eventually, a Tongan contingent would join the British task force to help guard the base, the last in the long line of rugby playing nations drawn to the scrum of Helmand. To satisfy the water requirements of this military city, four 150 metre boreholes were dug into the coral strata that underlay the desert floor. Daily, these sucked up 100,000 litres of clean water that had made the underground journey from the Hindu Kush. The surplus was bottled in a bottling plant and transported to the patrol bases.[622] A mock Afghan village

would be built alongside the base to enhance the realism of the training, peopled by locally-employed villagers. The massive military presence inevitably provoked a mini-economic boom in the area, clearly doing 'good' but not as do-gooders imagine. Towards the end of the war, over 10,000 civilians and 60,000 vehicles were recorded on the camp's databases – Bastion had become a commercial hub. In fact, by the height of the war some 35 per cent of Task Force Helmand comprised civilians (4,867 employees from sixty-seven companies).[623] Not all business was licit – at least on the Afghan side. Soldiers manning the entrances routinely intercepted around twenty drug parcels every day, which represented a tiny fraction of the drugs smuggled into the complex. The ANA Camp Shorabak was probably one of the bigger drug bazaars in central Helmand. In the first Gulf War, British soldiers had named their bases after characters from the television comedy series *Blackadder*. That subversive humour was entirely absent in Helmand. A visitor to Camp Bastion could find himself accommodated in the soberly named Britannia Lines, but never Baldrick Lines.

Perhaps the outstanding feature of Camp Bastion was the air traffic. The base had originally been built by 38 Engineer Regiment in April 2006. A two-man RAF Tactical Air Traffic Control Unit was posted to the camp operating from a rudimentary control tower. Just over an hour after this first air traffic control team declared the gravel landing strip open, the first military flight landed. The dirt strip runway was designed to take just three aircraft per week. Within two years the runway at Bastion (later expanded to two runways) would handle hundreds of thousands of flights. In 2007 the runway was hardened allowing up to 5,000 flights per day. By the following year Camp Bastion was handling 400 flights per day or 12,000 per month. This meant that Bastion was handling more traffic than Birmingham, Luton and Edinburgh airports, and only ranked below Stansted Airport in terms of volume of traffic.[624] When the US marines arrived in 2009, air traffic mushroomed. In one week in 2011, over 3,000 flights were handled at Camp Bastion. In that year Bastion became the fourth busiest British-run airport. In March alone, before the opening of a new control tower, there were 16,329 aircraft movements.[625] For the permanent residents of the camp, including the Afghan shanty town dwellers, living on the edge of one the busiest military airfields in the world was little different to living next to a major European airport like Heathrow, with the added inconvenience that flights did not slacken at night. If nothing else, the war in Helmand proved a welcome boon to the civil airline and freight industry.

Lieutenant Colonel Bramble, also serving with 19 Regiment Royal Artillery,

remembered arriving at the camp with these words:

‘Camp Bastion itself is a huge and thriving camp. Its high perimeter walls and sentry boxes offer the necessary protection but it really is in the middle of nowhere. The rows of tents, ISO containers, antennas and HESCO Bastion all constructed into a melee of tracks and roads can make the first impressions of camp quite confusing. WMIKS, DROPS, Danish tracked vehicles and all sorts of jingly vehicles are constantly moving around. There are approximately 5000 personnel in camp during this first week of the RIP [Relief in Place] and it generally holds 3500.’[626]

He was writing in the spring of 2008 before the camp expanded to accommodate four times this number of soldiers.

For Sapper Toher, Afghanistan was ‘hot, dusty and generally just uncomfortable’.[627] His immediate priority was to bag a bunk in one of the air-conditioned tents at Camp Bastion, adding with the cynicism of an experienced soldier, ‘that’s if you can find a tent where the air con is working’. The baking heat impressed the young Briton as did the fine talcum powder sand which got everywhere ‘in your ears, up your nose, in your sleeping bag and anywhere you could imagine’. After settling into one of the large transit tents ‘that look like they were used for scouts camping in the 80s’, Toher faced the inevitable RSOI training package. The experience seemed to leave him jaded:

‘The next morning we were up to start a four day training package for all newly arriving personnel; not being used to the heat, we were all suffering a bit and to top it off we were subjected to 6 hours of PowerPoint presentations updating us in great detail of the current situation. 20 power point in a day.’

The second day of training was spent on the ranges:

‘That sounds easy enough, but getting there was a different story. It was a short walk of less than 2 km, but with all the heat sand and dust, it felt much longer and the relief was clearly visible on everyone’s faces when we arrived. When that was finished, the rest of the day was spent in briefings, mostly on first aid and the communications equipment we would be using in theatre.’

It was not all hardship for the young sapper. After a couple of days in this unfamiliar environment Toher seemed to cheer up:

‘We all started to find our feet (and our way round the camp). There are plenty of welfare facilities to keep ourselves entertained in our downtime, the camp even has it’s

[sic] own little Pizza Hut as well as the internet and telephone suites along with a few local market stall traders selling additional bits and pieces, not bad for a camp in the middle of the desert.'

On the third day he practised counter-IED drills, 'a real eye opener on the ever present danger that awaits us', and on the last day he returned with his comrades to the ranges to practise shooting from vehicles. 'By the end of the day' he observed 'we had more sand on us than we did around us!' Perhaps the most valuable part of this training was talking to fellow soldiers who were at the end of their six month tour and who could offer advice on the perils the green soldiers faced.

On completion of the RSOI training package units were broken up and deployed to their respective patrol bases, another long and delayed process because of the shortage of helicopters. For some, the experience of being plucked from the relative comforts of Camp Bastion to an 'austere' patrol base came as a shock – one soldier felt he had been deposited in 'the arse end of nowhere'. The phrase 'polishing my austere' was coined, mixing a masturbatory metaphor with the cleaning chores that accompany the life of a soldier. In the first two years of the war such hardship was the rule for most soldiers. Over time, an intensive program of base upgrades undertaken by Royal Engineers gradually improved living conditions. Some locations, like FOB Inkerman, would always feel like forts marooned in the middle of enemy territory.

Despite the medieval backwardness, by the middle of the war, a British soldier in Helmand could reasonably expect to be connected to the modern world and enjoy some distractions for off-duty entertainment. Sapper Hunt, a keen Portsmouth supporter, was genuinely surprised by his new surroundings:

'I was impressed with the amount of activities that were available, when there is down time. There's a TV room, where I can watch Portsmouth FC smash everyone up and down the Premiership. Also a ping-pong table is available when the Gurkhas aren't on it. There is also the world's slowest internet terminal where we believe a hamster is inside controlling the Web. For the more active ones there is a multi-activity gym, with free weights for sculpting the Guns. It is Fijian free as they're to [sic] busy bench-pressing the ISO containers around the corner… On a serious note I didn't expect half the stuff at this FOB, and shows the British Army is prepared and facilitated better than is made out in the press.'[628]

For most soldiers the simple provision of an internet connection and the opportunity to

telephone home were among the most valued assets at patrol bases.

For a paratrooper serving with B Company, 2 Para at Patrol Base Wazili in 2010, connection with the outside world was well-provided for:

'We have a welfare tent that is equipped with a 42 inch TV with a few selected channels. We also have 4 internet terminals which do try the blokes patients [sic] on a regular basis as it can take about 3 minutes to load a single page. However we are all more than happy that we have the extra means to keep in touch with the outside world so to speak. The tent also has 4 text link machines which allow us to text messages to mobile phones.'[629]

In the second half of the war, this outside world began visiting the more isolated patrol bases. Entertainment shows had previously been restricted to the large bases. By the summer of 2011 a soldier serving with A Company, 1 Rifles could record the arrival of a dance troupe:

'The show went down a storm, with several Riflemen promptly falling in love with the dancers and trying to abscond with them on the helicopter which came to pick them up later that night.'[630]

Other aspects of patrol base existence, as one Argyll and Sutherland soldier recalled, seemed universal and unchanging:

'Some things, however, never change. Comms are terrible. Cigarettes are consumed apace. Goat bearded scientists in far-off laboratories contrive well-meant and poorly named pieces of equipment in order to further the war effort, all of which share the defining characteristic of being really heavy, and must be carried everywhere. The Corned Beef Hash supply chain remains unbroken, but morale remains high.'[631]

Many soldiers were unquestionably moved by the strangeness and mystery of this central Asian country as well as by its abiding beauty. The officer commanding 9 Parachute Squadron Royal Engineers, based at Sangin District Centre, one of the most dangerous bases in Helmand, was almost poetical about his surroundings:

'Life in the FOBs can be really misleading. I am writing this from Sangin whilst overlooking the weekly bazaar and cattle market. Below me are the buildings for the local Governor and the Mosque. The village elders are sat outside on a rug sipping Chi and discussing, in an amusing animated manner, the politics of Sangin and other local disputes. Beyond the children are playing in the newly developed school which has 13

classrooms. Further away workmen are ferrying families amongst the reeds and islands that are scattered across the width of the shallow Helmand river. Many are picnicking in the midday sun. On the horizon are a series of low mountains with numerous mud walled compounds that seemingly glow at sunset. It is hard to imagine a place that could so easily return to violence…ultimately, it is beautiful scenery.'[632]

This beauty provided some distraction from the undeniable squalor of daily life. Urinals – known as 'desert roses' – comprised of plastic pipes buried in the ground at an angle. Latrines were constructed from old barrels, testing the resolve of even those with insensitive noses and strong stomachs. One of the inevitable consequences of living in such confined environments was the risk of Diarrhoea and Vomiting (D&V). Few soldiers escaped a bout of D&V during a tour of Helmand and their condition only served to worsen the state of routinely nauseating latrines. Every day the waste from latrines had to be taken away for incineration. It was the most distasteful job in the bases and nobody ever got used to stirring and burning the daily slop of human excrement.

The unpopularity of the improvised 'long drop' toilets encouraged technological innovations, some of which required a manual adeptness which if bungled could have disastrous consequences for the unfortunate soldier:

'The toilets are wooden cubicles and not the long drops that were used in the past. At this point in the letter it's best not to be eating or about to eat. We now have state of the art zip closed silver bags which come in a white bag which you dispose of in the bin, the silver bag gets burnt once used. When opened there is another bag inside which you open, put over the toilet opening and well you know the rest. However it is always best to know what you are doing the first time you use this apparatus unlike Cpl McEvoy who in the middle of the night had a nature call and having not used this method before picked up a silver bag and not a white one ie a used bag. He then went through the opening procedure and proceeded to put his hand in to open the bottom just that little bit more, well he got a little more than he expected lets [sic] put it that way.'[633]

Soldiers on patrol, of course, could avoid these difficult rituals and return to nature. Crapping has a special place in soldiers' hearts, for reasons that probably only Freudian psychologists can explain. This description by Sergeant Douglas Craig, a gunner who served in Helmand in 2007, perfectly captured the spirit of the deed, if not the smell:

'I yomp my way up the western concave slope of the horseshoe and notice a slight overhang of rock. I squat and 'lay a cable'. There's a fine sense of peace when the wind is

blowing through your bollocks as they dangle and you're squeezing a good shit out. These softly [sic] paper towels are a fucking godsend. Your finger don't go through them when you're wiping your arse and you get about ten sheets in there…I stand up like a caveman for all the gun position to see, cock out to the world…'[634]

Ablutions were commonly little more than a hose connected to a cold water tank. Showers were taken using solar bags, an experience that could be 'emotional' in the depth of an Afghan winter when the sun barely warmed the bags. Washing clothes was improvised in canals or using cement mixers as washing machines. One officer was horrified by the smell emanating from his socks after being forced to wear the same pair for a month through a shortage of water at his patrol base. Soldiering in Helmand was not for the faint hearted.

The experience of Lance Corporal Sutcliffe, serving with the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers on Operation Herrick 12, was typical of the contrasts soldiers could experience as they moved form one patrol base to the next. In mid-March Sutcliffe was deployed to FOB Keenan, which he discovered was surprisingly well equipped:

'It's one of the smaller FOBs, within in it you have a cookhouse, gym, ablutions, TV room and the accommodation is a huge tent with about 8 beds in [sic] with a mosquito net surrounding your bed space.'[635]

Sutcliffe only remained at FOB Keenan for five days before being ordered to a nearby patrol base to support a 3 Rifles platoon on its last three weeks in-country. PB Zumberlay was a mere three kilometres away – a distance that might be walked in half an hour in normal circumstances. It took Lance Corporal Sutcliffe and his escort six and half hours to cover the distance due to the discovery of three IEDs. When he finally got to his new base he discovered to his disappointment that PB Zumberlay was 'an old compound' that had 'no luxuries'.

Given the primitive conditions of life in the patrol bases, many of the normal regulations of military life necessarily became suspended. Hair length – a topic of perpetual fascination in armies and a subject explored in Norman Dixon's classic *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* – was one such regulation. Soldiers deployed in isolated outposts took the opportunity to grow their hair long, to the despair of visiting Regimental Sergeant Majors who threatened all manner of sanctions against these 'long-haired lovers from Liverpool' when they returned to one of the main bases. Without the provision of a barber there was little soldiers could do to keep their hair length trim, unless

they were willing to risk the hairdressing skills of an ANA soldier claiming to be a barber in a former life (many did, to make extra income from British soldiers). Moustaches and beards also sprouted in the early years of the war provoking indignant comments from senior officers about ‘scruffy soldiers’, as well as merciless jokes from fellow soldiers. For the common soldier this hirsute anarchy represented liberation and an important psychological valve from the daily dangers faced on patrols. The early period of anarchy, naturally, was never going to last. By the end of the war British soldiers conformed to Queen’s Regulations in all matters, including the permissible length of head and facial hair.

Keeping up morale in the patrol bases was vital to seeing out a six month in Helmand. One of the most important contributors to morale was undoubtedly mail. Soldiers have always craved news from home and the servicemen and women deployed to Helmand were no exception to this rule. D company 2 Para were astonished by the amount of mail it received addressed simply to ‘A Soldier’, an unconscious echo of the epitaph on the headstones of thousands of unknown soldiers:

‘We are receiving plenty of anonymous parcels from charity groups, rotary clubs, veterans and random strangers, all addressed to “A Soldier”. All contain letters, and I make sure that we reply to all of them. It is astonishingly generous of these people to send us teabags, toothbrushes, soap and little snacks. Most of them are sent by the older generation or from someone who understands what military service means. It is quite humbling to read some of those letters, and yours of course, all of which add a little escapism to our lives here.’[636]

Some soldiers were genuinely moved by the sentimental gestures of complete strangers. When a sapper serving with 24 Commando Regiment Royal Engineers opened a parcel and discovered a letter from a young girl, the soldier’s normally tough exterior was breached and the letter became a spiritual keepsake:

‘One of the other members of 61 Field Support Squadron received a small parcel simply addressed ‘to a member of the army fighting in Afghanistan’. When opened, he found a number of useful items hard to procure out here, a new toothbrush, some sweets and a number of other inexpensive items that would make his life a little more pleasant. What really captured him though was the letter enclosed within the box. It was from a young girl of 15 thanking him and everyone else out here for the sacrifices they were making and the moral courage it took to come here and fight for their country. She also wanted to remind him that we are all thought about. To all of us that read this letter it has

meant something and to the soldier that first read it he still keeps it with him as a reminder.'[637]

By 2009, some quarter of a million parcels were being posted to the task force, with some individual soldiers receiving several hundred unsolicited parcels. The amount of mail soldiers received became so great – especially at Christmas – the Ministry was eventually forced to make an appeal not to send unsolicited mail and gifts to Helmand because of the logistic burden this created.

Keeping in touch with home manifested itself in other ways. All the major public events of this period – the royal wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton, the Queen's Jubilee, and the Olympic Games – were celebrated in Helmand. Bunting, party hats, and mountains of food made their appearance, to the probable perplexity of Afghans, as British soldiers sought to recreate the mood of the nation in their isolated patrol bases. On the occasion of the Jubilee, every member of 3 Yorks (Duke of Wellington's) received a Fortnum and Mason gift box, echoing the tin gift boxes sent to soldiers in the First World War.

Another morale booster was pets. Soldiering on a frontline is a life starved of moments of affection. Comradeship bonds soldiers in adversity but does not fill this emotional gap. Pets, and especially dogs, have always provided a source of solace and readily requited companionship. Afghanistan had a large population of ill-treated dogs, some mangy, some bred for fighting with clipped ears, and some simply abandoned. A dog had starred in the famous British defeat at the Battle of Maiwand. Over time, many bases acquired a resident dog spoiled by British soldiers who imported quite different cultural attitudes towards animals compared to their Afghan counterparts. 12 Platoon of Inkerman Company, Grenadier Guards adopted a small family of animals during their tour on Operation Herrick 11, but their experience was not unusual:

'Other notable additions to the multiple included a puppy aptly named 'Herrick', quickly adopted by Gdsm Spencer from our predecessors, whilst LSgt O'Toole fed and looked after a cat and her kittens given the dubious names of 'seven', 'six' and 'two' after the 7.62 mm calibre rounds fired by the GPMG.'[638]

When 3 Troop of 51 Parachute Squadron Royal Engineers took over a patrol base in Nad-e Ali, they shared it with 'the other occupants of the compound … 3 cows, 3 goats and 2 chickens. Not forgetting the infamous Cockerel which would haunt Sappers Chiocci, Sampson& myself through the night'.[639] As was the common experience for soldiers

serving in the First World War, unwanted animals like mice could be a problem, encouraging mice-hunting competitions:

'Since we arrived at PB1 we have been terrorised by mice chewing through welfare packages and our personal packages so we started laying traps for them. This has taken off as the sport of the PB as we now have a kill board and rather than laying traps in and around our welfare room we now have them hidden around the entire PB in a bid to take the lead. Some have even gone to the lengths of waking up half an hour early to get to the top of the leader board which is currently Sapper Swinfield with 17 kills.'[640]

Some soldiers became so attached to their patrol base pets they adopted them. An enterprising Royal Marine NCO serving at Kajaki was taken by two abandoned fighting dogs and successfully brought them back to Britain. The handsome pair lived out the rest of their days in the more peaceful surroundings of southern England. In the summer of 2010 a Gurkha company based in Babaji adopted a local stray and named it Brin. The stumpy-legged mongrel enjoyed going for walks with the patrols. More usefully, the soldiers discovered that its natural inquisitiveness sometimes led Brin to uncover IEDs. By the end of the tour the Gurkhas were so grateful to the animal that the sum of £4,000 was raised to bring Brin home. He was eventually adopted by a teacher in East Sussex. In 2011, the family of a Territorial Army paratrooper killed in Nad-e Ali – Conrad Lewis - moved a mountain of bureaucratic obstruction to bring home a stray dog he had befriended before he died. Pegasus had no idea of her emotional value to the bereaved family but she almost certainly appreciated the miraculous change from patrol base existence to life in an English suburb.

An unusual pet was a donkey that wandered into a patrol base manned by fusiliers just south of Sangin. Despite protestations from an army vet, the errant animal was swiftly adopted by the soldiers who gave it a name ('Dave the Donkey') and added a seaside hat to its head. Not everyone judged the opportunistic adoption a good idea when it was discovered that the donkey had a habit of braying loudly at dawn. Eventually the animal was reunited with its rightful owner, no worse the wear for its brief service with the British Army. In Babaji, paratroopers serving with B Company 2 Para actually bought two mules from villagers – naming them Pegasus and Princess – and used them to ferry supplies in the absence of motorised transport. Pegasus proved docile, but the stubborn Princess seemed less keen to support the British war effort.

Inevitably, serving in a patrol base meant long periods of boredom and monotonous guard duties. Each patrol base was effectively a small fort planted in a hostile landscape.

The modern equivalent of the stone-built castle turret was the sandbag sangar, a word imported from colonial India. Sangars came in many shapes and sizes – single sangars, double sangars, 'super sangars' and Cuplock sangars. Competitions were run between Royal Engineer units to see who could build the fastest sangar (it took less than a day with adequate manpower and resources) and all had to be manned twenty-four hours a day, which implied hours spent staring out across an unchanging landscape. There were moments of occasional light relief as a Lance Corporal Mark Allen discovered on one shift, but these were rare:

'Taking over the sangar for my second shift I noticed that several kids had gathered in front. This provided some light hearted entertainment at first as they started talking to me (speaking better English than me with my Belfast accent). My first mistake was telling them my name, as then everything was "Mark, throw me sweets", "Mark, throw me sun cream" and then they wanted cylume glow sticks as they must have been planning a rave that night. After about 30 minutes of not giving them anything I then learnt that "I was a bad person" and "Mark doesn't like Muslims".'[641]

Such moments of humour belied the dangers faced by sangar sentries. On Operation Herrick 4 the rooftop sangars at locations like the Sangin District Centre had become aiming marks for Taliban rockets, killing and injuring several soldiers. In the second half of the war when the Taliban became more proficient marksmen, several sangar sentries lost their lives to sniper fire. Old wartime tricks such as creating dummy sentries were employed to fool Taliban snipers. At some patrol bases an acute shortage of manpower meant that mannequins had to be employed not so much to draw fire as to convince the Taliban that someone was actually manning the sangar at all. The risks that these patrol bases were forced to take were sometimes exploited by the Taliban. One Royal Marine patrol returned to its patrol base to discover that the outer wall had been breached by a bomb parked in a wheel barrow against the exterior wall. Due to a lack of manpower a single NCO had been left to man one sangar and the Taliban had exploited the blind spot at the base. In the end the British were very fortunate the Taliban never realised just how stretched some of the patrol bases were and how vulnerable they were to being overrun by a determined assault. One patrol base – Pylae – was almost over-run, the marines saving themselves by detonating concealed Claymore mines at the last minute, just as the Taliban were about to break into the compound. Less careful Afghan soldiers and policemen did on occasions suffer this fate with all the occupants of the patrol base murdered by insurgents.

There was perhaps no typical day serving in a forward operating base, but Sapper Mortin serving with 23 Engineer Regiment (Air Assault) managed to capture the routine of life at such a base (FOB Inkerman) in his monthly blog:

‘0600 – Wake from camp cots and have a solar shower, a water filled bag with a nozzle. Get dressed.

0700 – Start work, this varies from day to day. It could be constructing a building from scratch using basic hand tools or once this is built it could entail climbing the construction in full body armour and helmet to lay the corrugated iron roof and the protective layer on top that stops mortars and rockets.

0800 – Breakfast. This is a choice of porridge or a small fried breakfast (plenty of energy for work).

0830 – Back to work. Continuing where we left off, Sometimes there are several jobs so we may be broken into 2 sections for this.

1200 – Lunch. This is either soup with bread or corned beef mixed with mash potato and beans.

1300 – Work. Sometimes if the weather is particularly hot we will have an extra hour off to avoid heat stroke which is a constant concern in this environment. Work carried out on roofs is often stopped during the day due to the enemy firing at us.

1800 – Dinner. Stop to eat again, this is the meal everyone looks forward to and if we are very lucky days may even have fruit cocktail.

1900 – Sometimes a return to work but if not this is the time to carry out personal admin such as hand washing cloths, cleaning your weapon or writing home.’[642]

It should be remembered that aside from personal administration time, the soldiers had no days off. When one task was finished Sapper Mortin and his comrades were simply directed to start the next job. This routine continued for weeks on end in temperatures that exceeded 40 degrees in the summer and fell below freezing in winter.

Filling the time at patrol bases, even with the provision of internet connections and televisions demanded ingenuity and everybody went about it in different ways. Lieutenant Newton, serving with Number 3 Company, Coldstream Guards, perfectly sketched the slightly mad relationships that grow between men forced to live cheek by jowl in unpleasant and dangerous circumstances:

‘Despite being busy, boredom is still a major issue to contend with. Everyone deals with it in their own way. LSgt Gill and Gdsm Hemans play dominos and talk ‘Jamaican’ to each other, Dmr “Ikea” Blakelock builds things (and then watches them fall apart again), Gdsm Dellar likes his sudoku and his dairy milk, whilst Gdsm Oliver is partial to listening to criminally bad music on his Ipod and reading footy mags. Gdsm Naylor talks non stop and always seems to have eaten too many skittles, LCpl Jones continually upgrades his sleeping area and tells Naylor to keep the noise down (when not falling down wells- another story), and Gdsm Skelton tells us in an extremely manly fashion how he cant wait to ‘get my hair and nails done and go shopping’ when he gets back. Gdsm Bourke reminisces about his days as a ‘raver’ in ‘Dony,’ while Murphy plays quite remarkable games of chess with LCpl Crombie (both lose all their main pieces within the first dozen moves, and then battle it out for hours with pawns), LCpl Hawksby reads, drinks tea and admires his beard, Dmr Brownlie gets his head down whenever possible (being a Scotsman probably dreaming about how much money he is saving), Gdsm Schofield runs a cafe, Gdsm Etherington is always looking for something he’s lost, Gdsm Pontone always seems to be nattering away about something he knows nothing about, and Gdsm Murphy, our resident Essex wide boy entertains himself by pretending to listen. LSgt Staker looks across at the state of my living area and shakes his head, or laments with any Geordie he can find about the state of the Magpies [Newcastle United], whilst LSgt Laws takes matters into his own hands and leads them to Premiership and European Glory on the game ‘Championship Manager.’ Needless to say Sgt Wilson tends to spend his spare time trying to organise me, and there was me thinking I’d left the days of being told to tidy my room behind.’[643]

It would be difficult to find a more representative pen picture of the cross-section of young men Britain sent to war in Helmand Province.

A mordant and stoical sense of humour has always been a staple of the British soldier and the bare conditions in some of the bases provoked a typically humorous response from servicemen. Although the war never produced a Lance Bombardier ‘Spike’ Milligan, the most notable feature from the great output of regimental blogs was a cultural reflex to see ‘the funny side of things’, no matter how bad those things got. For Lance Corporal Preston, who had endured a long two day journey to Afghanistan, serving in FOB Dwyer was an excuse to fantasise about how life might be in this hot desert oasis:

‘I wake up whenever I feel like it, usually around 10am. I don my shorts and flip-flops, walk on to the decking of my beach house where a tall beautiful Mexican woman is

standing ready with an ice cold pint of Fosters; then I wake up and it's 8 o'clock and I'm in FOB DWYER, Afghanistan.'[644]

Milligan and his desert war comrades would have entirely understood the sentiment.

Alcoholic drink, of course, was a taboo. For decades the British Army had taken a relaxed approach to drinking on operations, generally allowing a maximum of two pints daily at the larger bases. In the Great War, an alcohol ban would have provoked mutiny – 'No Whiskey- No War' was the cry from the trenches. In the Second World War, the notion of stopping soldiers (or God forbid, officers) from drinking would have been treated like the suggestion of a madman. These laissez faire attitudes still persisted during the early stages of British Army operations in Iraq in 2003, but under the influence of an American ally that enforced a policy of strict prohibition, British forces duly promulgated a total alcohol ban. Other NATO allies refused to endorse this po-faced Puritan attitude to drink. A few years later, a British soldier serving in Afghanistan had little of no chance of getting his hands on his favourite tipple, although the Kabul contingent did manage a few 'reconnaissance trips' to international hotels. However, there was also sufficient anecdotal evidence to suggest that alcoholic spirits did reach remote patrol bases, in not small quantities, concealed in food parcels, and masked as energy or health drinks. For some, the total alcohol ban just seemed to be an example of British pragmatism bowing to American Puritanism.

Judging from the behaviour of some of the other national contingents, the Puritans may have had a point. At the ISAF HQ in Kabul – a base that might as well have been in a different country – attitudes to alcoholic drink were quite different. At its height, forty odd nations maintained liaison officers at the ISAF base which was not much bigger than a football stadium. They proved a thirsty lot. The headquarters boasted seven themed bars including a German beer hall, a snooker hall, a 'Tora Bora' sports bar, a 37 Club and a 'Nordic palace'.[645] As in Baghdad's 'Green Zone' alcohol was followed by a roaring trade in pornography and a spate of sexual shenanigans. The alcohol also fuelled wider indiscipline with soldiers sometimes found drunk on guard duty. And it was not only at the ISAF HQ that alcohol flowed. The Spanish and Italians would not sacrifice their lunchtime wine and the French base had five bars. The military airport at Kabul was nicknamed 'Kaia-napa' after the notorious Cypriot resort because of the number of bars. True to national stereotype, the champion drinkers were the 4,000 odd German troops stationed in northern Afghanistan. The drinking habits of the German soldiers - who were prohibited from leaving their bases in the hours of darkness, a sure way to increase alcohol

consumption – eventually became the subject of national debate. It shocked German parliamentarians to discover that their soldiers on operations had managed to down 1.7 million pints of beer and 90,000 bottles of wine in one year. It was little wonder that German soldiers were returning from a tour of duty in Afghanistan plumper than when they deployed. ‘Useless cake-eaters’ was how the indignant report branded modern German soldiery.

Denied alcohol, food became an obsession. For some visitors, British culinary habits remained as appalling as they had ever been. The American journalist Michael Yon was amazed to witness British soldiers endure weeks on hard rations:

‘The morale of British troops is unmistakeably good, which cannot be attributed to the terrible rations they eat. After more than a month with British combat troops in the Green Zone, I hadn’t seen a piece of fresh fruit on a base, despite that we are surrounded by farms.’[646]

Yon’s surprise at the stoicism of the British soldier pointed to a more serious problem that was never fully resolved.

Dispersed in isolated bases and with a constrained resupply chain that relied on a small fleet of vulnerable helicopters the army fell back on feeding a significant proportion of the frontline troops with ten man ration packs. The nutritional content of the ration packs was scientifically calibrated to provide both essential vitamins and calories – but not for extended periods. Three years into the war, as Michael Yon reported, some bases were still living exclusively on ration packs for weeks on end. The results were visible to everyone. Soldiers shed weight by the pound and some, for a multiplicity of reasons, could have been described as malnourished (as much as anything, tiredness was a factor - when faced with a choice between cooking a meal or falling asleep many would choose the latter). In this weakened state soldiers were both more vulnerable to injury and also more vulnerable to succumbing to their injuries. Coroner reports would always remain sensitively guarded but the question remained whether a number of British fatalities had actually been manifesting early symptoms of malnourishment at the time of their deaths. The Americans in Helmand demonstrated that getting fresh food to isolated locations was not a logistic impossibility. For reasons that remain unclear, the British struggled to deliver at least fresh fruit, which was abundant in Helmand, to its frontline soldiers.

In fact, Yon’s comments on British rations, or at least the ration packs, were some way off the mark. For individual soldiers, the 24 hour Operational Ration Pack had been

revolutionised beyond the imagination of previous generations. For decades, soldiers had subsisted on the unimaginatively named Menus A, B, C or D. Some of the contents of these uninspiring 'rat packs' had entered army folklore: 'Biscuit Brown' which broke your teeth, and 'Screech Powder' which made your gums screech, to name two. By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, a British soldier had a choice of twenty ration packs including six options for vegetarian, Halal, and Sikh or Hindu palates. Options included: Thai chicken curry, sweet salmon pasta, mixed bean salad, paella, beef and cassava, Oreo cookies, Shrewsbury biscuits and stem ginger biscuits.[647] These were unheard-of delicacies. As one of the catering warrant officers who trialled the new ration packs explained, this was a better-fed, more cosmopolitan and brand-orientated generation of soldiers. The High Street had come to the battlefield.

However, for army chefs, finding imaginative ways to cook monotonous ten man ration packs remained a thankless task. A Royal Irish ranger based at Sangin was unsparingly critical of his daily fare:

'The food in Sangin District Centre is actually getting worse and worse. The so called Army Cooks (note I'm still not prepared to call them chefs) seems as interested in cooking as Hitler was in joining the Peaceniks. Corned beef trash has become our staple diet, but we keep getting told the cooks are "trying." Yes they are trying, "Trying" to starve us out of Sangin, if you were to ask anybody who has to eat their muck.'[648]

This recalled the old army joke that the chef's course was the hardest in the armed forces because nobody passed it, but the criticism was unfair. At the time, Sangin District Centre had just two qualified army chefs who had the nearly impossible task of trying to satisfy the mouths of about 350 hungry soldiers on the slimmest of resources and in field conditions. Along with army engineers and vehicle mechanics, army chefs were probably the hardest working and least thanked soldiers in the task force.

The gruelling work routine facing army chefs in Helmand can be illustrated by the experiences of Corporal Hodgson who served with 4 AES on Operation Herrick 12. Hodgson arrived in Camp Bastion in early March 2010 and after completing the mandatory six day RSOI package was assigned to the camp 'super kitchen'. His first job was to supervise four chefs working on the advance preparation team. This small team had the daily chore of preparing potatoes and vegetables for between 4,000 and 5,000 personnel daily, as well as preparing up to 1,400 individual meals. It meant getting up well before sunrise and working flat out until the middle shift took over. Shortly afterwards

Corporal Hodgson was moved to this second shift and found himself responsible for feeding up to 7,000 personnel for the evening meal.[649] The scale of the operation made Camp Bastion the largest kitchen run by the British Army in modern times. In any one week diners consumed 8.8 tonnes of potatoes, 7.7 tonnes of chips, 1.4 tonnes of sausages, 2.3 tonnes of bacon, 5.7 tonnes of beef and 12.7 tonnes of chicken. All this stock arrived by sea and then across the overland route from Karachi, with as many as forty ISO containers arriving every three days at the camp gates.[650] At a patrol base like Shahzad in northern Nad-e Ali, generally reckoned to be relatively austere even in the summer of 2011, marine chefs feeding the 250 strong contingent over a six month period worked through 12,150 slices of bacon, 3,024 tins of beans, 8,400 baguettes, 5,880 slices of pizza, 1,200 whole chickens, 1,150 sacks of potatoes and no less than 3,840 steaks.[651]

At a main base like Camp Bastion there could be no complaints about the quality or quantity of 'scoff'. Breakfast was traditional and included a choice of porridge, bacon and sausage, fried, scrambled or boiled eggs, baked beans, plum tomatoes, mushrooms and black pudding. For those who preferred there was a continental breakfast of sliced meats, cheese and croissants. At lunch time four hot choices were available, one of which was always a pasta or rice dish. There was also a salad bar, a jacket potato bar with four fillings, a Panini bar with four choices, and an assorted rolls bar with five choices. For those who missed lunch because they were working or catching up on sleep after a night stag six choices were offered at the evening meal including three potato dishes and three vegetable choices. For those with a sweet tooth there were at least two hot deserts and a selection of cold sweets. On Sundays the troops were treated to a traditional Sunday roast and every two weeks the chefs put on a themed night. With its shops and pizza outlets nobody based at Camp Bastion faced the prospect of shedding weight over the course of a six month tour. On special occasions – such as Christmas – an effort was made to ensure that even the most remote locations received a traditional festive fare, as these Royal Irish serving with A Company in Nad-e Ali recalled:

'The Christmas Day dinner run was an event that is worthy of a mention in dispatches all of its own. Our chef here in Saidabad had the task of producing over 300 Christmas dinners to be sent out to all the checkpoints and locations within our AO [Area of Operations]. As well as cooking for A Coy he had to produce meals for D Coy, CO's TAC, the Engr Troop, and our C-IED section. So with seven locations to deliver to the CSM "Billy Roy" bedecked the quad with antlers and a flashing red nose and we set off to make to make sure all A Coy soldiers received a hot turkey dinner on Christmas day.'[652]

Outside Camp Bastion, at locations like the District Centre at Sangin, resources and choice were much more circumscribed. Further out in the FOBs and patrol bases camaraderie in adversity seemed to overtake complaints about the food. Many soldiers became self-taught chefs (and became highly prized members of their sections). Home made ovens were built or improvised in compounds taken over by British soldiers. At a base like FOB Inkerman the sheer difficulties of resupply encouraged a more tolerant spirit. A 2 Rifles soldier was more than understanding of the challenge facing the army chefs at FOB Inkerman:

'The chefs do an excellent job, when you consider the ingredients they have to work with. Try creating 6 months worth of meals out of corn-beef hash, pineapple slices, a couple of tonnes of rice and half a million jars of peanut butter. Hours are spent opening the 500 tins required to feed the FOB on a daily basis (they have already worn out 5 can openers in 6 weeks).'[653]

Overland supply was too dangerous and helicopter resupply (by contracted civilian helicopters due to the lack of military helicopters) only took place once a month. This meant troops at FOB Inkerman had to be resupplied by air drop.

Corporal McLachlan was a Royal Engineer serving at FOB inkerman on Operation Herrick 10. Whenever an air drop was scheduled he and a three man team had to clear a route to the drop zone. This could take as long as three hours, in darkness. Describing a typical air drop Corporal McLachlan remembered:

'The plane passed over twice, each time dropping 8 pallets underneath 8 of the biggest parachutes you've ever seen, bearing in mind each parachute was lowering a one tonne weight underneath it. Each pallet had to be closely watched to see where it landed. Once all the pallets had landed the four sappers then had to clear a safe route to pallets which inevitably meant a race against local tribesmen intent on stealing the cargo. On this occasion a Fire Support Group fired some warning shots to try and scare them off but it didn't work.'[654]

After a further three hours all the pallets had been secured. To the amusement of the soldiers, the thieves had disdained stealing British Army rations. Corporal McLachlan and his team finally returned safely to FOB Inkerman and got to bed at 4am, a full twelve hours after they had started the task to recover the precious pallets.

Turning the contents of these pallets into three daily meals was the job of the Inkerman chefs. The fare may have been monotonous but it was not unhealthy. Breakfast comprised

of fried spam slices, canned chipolata, baked beans, and powdered scrambled egg (which one soldier thought shared ‘a remarkable similarity to lumpy milk of magnesia’). For those who preferred a continental breakfast, the continent, one wag remarked, was ‘waiting to be confirmed’. There was also a choice of muesli or cereal with ‘white water’ (powdered milk). Copious quantities of sugar were used ‘to disguise the taste’. Lunch comprised of tinned soup, more spam, more baked beans, noodles or rice, and tinned tuna. Boiled sweets and cooking chocolate were served as a dessert. For the evening meal the chefs were at last liberated from the tyranny of spam. This last meal might comprise of a beef satay (with extra quantities of peanut butter, again to disguise the taste), a chicken and herb crumble, powdered mustard mash, and sweet corn. A typical desert was pineapple rings in custard. The only drinks on offer throughout the day were ‘warmed tropical flavoured chlorinated water or a choice of tea and coffee’. It all smacked of wartime austerity and English boarding schools.

Water, indeed, was a constant problem. Equipped with generator-powered, man-portable water production units, most small bases had no choice but to heavily chlorinate the local water, creating an unpalatable drink. Unwilling to drink this chemical brew, soldiers demanded bottled water which created one of the biggest logistical nightmares facing the British. Soon, the task force was spending around £15 million every year on bottled water (a proportion flown to Afghanistan), and water pallets became one of the largest (and heaviest) routine loads on resupply runs.

Compared to their ANA counterparts, British soldiers could not complain. The dry ration daily allowance for an Afghan soldier was 250 grams of rice, 60 grams of oil, 30 grams of sugar, 20 grams of tea, 3 grams of milk, 15 grams of salt, 60 grams of peas, beans or dahl, and 2 grams of spices.[655] No soldier could survive on this amount of rations so the dry ration allowance was supplemented by a daily fresh ration allowance worth 140 Afghani. This might buy a slice of nan bread, 30 grams of fresh meat, 30 grams of fresh fruit, some potatoes, onions and tomatoes, a small cake and some cream. Unlike their British mentors, Afghan soldiers enjoyed the advantage of being able to shop (and steal) locally. Stealing was sometimes a necessity as chronic problems in the ANA’s logistic chain meant that ANA soldiers commonly suffered from a lack of rations, as well as other basics. ANA ‘shopping trips’ were the bane of British soldiers trying to impose some order on their charges but it was also recognised that nothing raised the morale of ANA soldiers more than returning to a patrol base with a goat or a couple of chickens, and a bag of rice slung over the shoulder.

When a group of gunners deployed to FOB Dwyer they were greatly amused by the antics of their fellow Afghan gunners whose main concern seemed to be food rather than fighting the enemy:

'We finally deployed to FOB DWYER …when the ANA arrived on the HLS carrying sacks of potatoes, bags of flour, cartons of cream and boxes of cakes! After lots of lifting, carrying, sweating, shouting and swearing we boarded the Chinooks for the FOB… Unfortunately, by Wednesday ANA supplies had run low and, before we knew it, mutiny! Fortunately, the uprising was quelled … and an admin run into GARMSIR was arranged to enable "the lads" to buy some "supplies"… On this occasion they surprised us by arriving back at the gun position with a sheep in tow. The poor beast obviously wasn't bought to keep the grass down on the gun position and was duly slaughtered after 3 days.'[656]

Over time, in areas where the fighting did diminish near British patrol bases, enterprising Afghans set up stalls knowing that soldiers crave little luxuries like fizzy drinks and, of course, fags. British reports of bazaars re-opening following the expulsion of the Taliban sometimes confused genuine economic growth with the simple opportunism of locals trying to make the most of the British military presence. The soldiers themselves also demonstrated opportunism. When Corunna Company, 3 Yorks (Duke of Wellington's), deployed to the Upper Gereshk Valley in the spring of 2012, they were generally welcomed. In the course of an operation, a Private Bainbridge serving with 7 Platoon, clearly missing 'the Chippy' back home, 'managed to purchase a bag of potatoes, some flatbread and cooking oil from local nationals'. The result was 'chip butties for everyone!'[657] No doubt, Bainbridge's stock rose in the platoon.

Commonly, holding shuras and doing business became natural bedfellows, as Burma Company of the same regiment recalled:

'5 Platoon in Check Point (CP) Perkha are doing really well. They have built up a network of friendly locals who are truly grateful for the security they provide. At a recent *shura* (meeting) over thirty locals attended for a cup of *chai* and discussed a wide-range of issues. A budding Afghan entrepreneur has spotted a business opportunity and crates of coca-cola often appear after a touch of bartering! The locals now know most of 5 Platoon by name and as they patrol through the village the locals shout out 'Commander Jamie' or 'Mac' and come over to talk and offer *chai*.'[658]

The ANA, by the middle of the war, had become the British Army's main effort. It

would only be through the mentoring and training of the Afghan soldier that the British soldier would be able to come home. Much would be written about the vices and virtues of Afghanistan's fledgling army. Perhaps much of this literature ignored the central and not insignificant fact that the British genuinely got on with their Afghan colleagues, without being too rose-tinted and despite all the frustrations. This never happened in Iraq but it became crucial in Afghanistan. The British love affair with central Asian tribesmen had a long history. Army pamphlets from the wars on the North-West Frontier averred that 'whatever may be the characteristics of the Pathan…it is beyond question that he appeals strongly to and enlists the sympathy of British officers who have had dealings with him politically or when associated with him in the Army'.[659] Perhaps it was Edwardian notions of masculinity that won over the British who were quick to see in these hardy specimens mirrors of their own fortitude: 'His manliness is at once apparent, and his proverbial hospitality, courtesy, courage, cheerfulness, and loyalty, make him an excellent companion, a valuable soldier, and entitle him to respect and admiration'. The Pathan may not have learned his game on the playing fields of Eton, but he acted as if he had.

A Lance Corporal Waite who served with 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters) OMLT in 2009, found the experience of mentoring the ANA enjoyable:

'Working with the ANA has been an experience. We have been on foot patrols with them on a nearly daily basis. They are a very different army to ours with the soldiers seemingly having the choice about whether they wear body armour, helmets or T-shirts and a baseball cap! On patrol they appear to follow orders without question and keep well spaced on the ground. Under contact I noticed that certain soldiers would not take cover until rounds were landing at their feet!… I have found my time working with the ANA enjoyably educational. They are friendly and generous with a good sense of humour.'[660]

Sergeant Dave Cooper serving with 5 Battery, 19 Royal Artillery Regiment was more prosaic in his assessment:

'Afghan soldiers reflect the society from which they are drawn and thus 70% of them are illiterate and they all share an Afghan approach to soldiering that is somewhat different from that which we are used to. This makes for a colourful, if occasionally frustrating, time and we have had to learn how to understand and work with the Afghan way.'[661]

For one Royal Irish officer, the whole experience was likened more humorously to 'a shot gun wedding with an Albanian Drug lord's hairy stepsister'.

The experience of the Royal Irish was typical of the British mentoring teams in the

early years of the war. In the summer of 2008, a 1 Royal Irish OMLT (Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team) was tasked with training up an ANA company or *tolay* at Camp Shorabak before deploying to Sangin. This company soon gained the nickname 'the Russian Convicts'. The most basic things such as attending training at the agreed hour tested the patience of the instructors to the limits:

'The veins on Capt Duggan's (OMLT 3's 2IC) forehead appear almost to pulsate with a silent rage as every day our Afghan friends fail to stick to agreed times. But with a shrug of their shoulders and a cheeky smile the Afghan soldier soon settles down and the delayed training starts. I'm sure with time a happy medium will be reached but hopefully before one of poor Capt Duggan's veins burst.'[662]

When the troops being trained by the Royal Irish were finally ready to deploy, about three weeks later, it took a small team of Ulstermen two and half hours to shepherd the convoy of Afghan soldiers just two kilometres between Camp Shorabak and Camp Bastion, by which time the whole move was cancelled anyway. Eventually the combined Anglo-Afghan force did set off for Sangin – a distance of about eighty kilometres - which took twenty-nine hours to drive. A Job-like patience was an indispensable prerequisite for anyone tasked with mentoring the ANA.

ANA indolence did have its amusing moments. Afghan soldiers enjoyed taking on their British counterparts in volleyball or football matches, but were less keen on PT sessions. Among the excuses offered by reluctant soldiers were 'I've got bees in my head' and 'I've run out of blood' – rationales that would surely have found a place in 'Spike' Milligan's war memoires.

The Green Howards (2 Yorks) similarly suffered trials of patience with Afghan driving as well as discovering other quirks about their recruits:

'The Transport Coy has discovered the Afghan style of driving, which involves driving as fast as you can and then crashing! SSgt Vickers has enormous fun training and assessing them, although he is looking a little greyer now! The four man Medical team has started to tackle the ANA Medical organisation; a steep and difficult task lies ahead. With the wealth of experience from WO2 Jones, Sgt's Fraser and Toogood the team will make great headway. Communication Coy mentors Sgt Parkin and Cpl 'Nick Cage' Roberts have discovered one major issue about the ANA soldiers, that they can not read or write which poses a problem when it comes to frequencies and filling in the Radio Log Book!'[663]

ANA soldiers needed education before bullets and it was to the great credit of the British Army that valiant attempts were made to fill this terrible gap in the recruit's lives with two week crash courses in basic literacy. English lessons were also popular, possibly because the teachers were not uncommonly blonde female soldiers, a novelty to the average Afghan recruit. Ubiquitous *Nuts* and *Zoo* magazines were also appreciated although it was suspected that ANA officers were not asking to borrow back copies to improve their English.

A general indiscipline was exacerbated by widespread drug-taking even on operations. One of the many false arguments made by the Taliban was that drug consumption was a Western addiction. In fact, marijuana smoking was rife in Afghanistan, once an obligatory stop on the hippy trail, and heroin addiction was climbing steeply, as it had done in Iran and Pakistan. It has always been a fallacy of drug producing countries that addiction is an exported problem that does not threaten the producer countries. Afghanistan was no exception to this rule. Marijauna was abundant in Helmand (by 2010 it began to rival the opium poppy) and ANA soldiers did not hesitate to avail themselves of this ready narcotic. Major Vance Crow, a tough rugby-playing, South African serving with the Royal Irish, was less than impressed by one of his ANA recruits who managed to shoot himself in the foot in a drug induced state:

'[The] second patient, an Afghan soldier, also far too familiar with marijuana for his own good, recently decided to clip his toe nails using an M16 rifle. In attempting to clip his nails this young man managed to shot his own foot. Fortunately he didn't damage himself too badly and should shortly be returned to his unit…Don't ever say there was a dull moment in Helmand.'[664]

The British could do little to interfere with this national custom but it certainly made some soldiers wary when shooting broke out.

If there was tolerance for 'Afghan ways' one reason was the undeniable respect that British soldiers felt for the hard lives their counterparts led. The life story of Colonel Sheren Shah Kobadi, the commander of 3/215 Corps that the British trained in the latter stages of the war was typical. With the face of an old boxer, Sheren Shah had been born in Kapisa Province, was in his late forties, and had spent his entire adult life at war. After completing his education at Baghram, Sheren Shah had joined the Russian-sponsored Afghan Army and served as an infantry commander. During the Soviet-Afghan War he became disgusted by the murder of a child by a Russian officer and by the indiscriminate bombing of a village that resulted in forty-two deaths, and he subsequently revolted along

with the rest of his company. Jailed for a period, he then joined the mujahidin and fought as a guerrilla until the Russian withdrawal in 1989. When civil war broke out Sheren Shah took command of an Afghan Army Kandak in Kabul. Following the collapse of this ruined city he joined the Northern Alliance and fought against the Taliban. Now he found himself back where he had started as a young man, in uniform, sponsored by foreign powers, and still fighting. Somehow, amidst all this violence, Sheren Shah had contrived to raise a family of six children. The other noteworthy fact about Sheren Shah was that he was fluent in Pashayee, one of Afghanistan's rare minority languages. In his life and origins Sheren Shah mirrored the complex fractures in Afghan society.

When the British first deployed to Helmand they were entrusted with training 3/205 'Heroes' Corps led by Brigadier Mohayadin, a task they inherited from the American PRT at Lashkar Gah. About the only good word that could be said about this formation was that it had a competent overall commander. Like Sheren Shah, Mohayadin was another Afghan veteran of many wars with a colourful past. Everything else, unfortunately, was broken. The American-built Camp Shorabak was already showing signs of pillaging. The brigade-sized force could only muster a single *kandak* (battalion). There were no reliable personnel or quartermaster systems in place. The formation was unable to mount independent operations except under the wing of the British task force. Even after three years of constant mentoring 3/205 Corps was only used cosmetically (to provide 'an Afghan face') in two major operations: the re-taking of Musa Qaleh and the delivery of the third turbine to Kajaki. In the British Army's last two significant operations in Helmand, Operations Panchai Palang and Moshtarak, the ANA was largely invisible, despite the spin suggesting otherwise. This invisibility, as much as anything, revealed the worrying failure of the mentoring experiment. Living alongside an ANA platoon in a patrol base and undertaking combined patrols was not raising the operational effectiveness of the ANA in meaningful ways. 'Patrolling' was something the Afghan soldier could do without British prodding. Running a modern conventional army in an even modestly competent fashion remained beyond the realistic aspirations of Afghanistan's reconstituted Ministry of Defence, despite the billions of dollars that were being poured into the project.

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In the summer of 2010, following a general reorganisation of ISAF forces in south-west Afghanistan, Task Force Helmand took over the mentoring of 3/215 Maiwand Corps. This was meant to be a fresh start under McChrystal's policy of 'embedded partnering'. This formation, compared to its predecessor, was at least fully established comprising of four

infantry *kandaks*, a highway *kandak*, a combat support *kandak*, and combat and service support *kandak*. But the problems persisted. These included poor leadership, woeful personnel management, terrible living conditions, and an unreliable pay system, with its inevitable consequence - a large outflow of demoralised recruits. The British Army's assessment of this brigade was realistic but a picture of a gradually improving Afghan Army was nonetheless presented in public as the ticket home for British troops.

In any one month only about half of 3/215 brigade's strength was actually deployed. One quarter were either on leave, AWOL or simply posted as 'absent'. Amongst the worst offenders were the officers who cited privilege as an excuse to be absent from their units. The remainder camped in Shorabak where they contributed marginally to the counter-insurgency but at least were being fed properly. The headquarters itself was only a third manned, many of the staff was illiterate and only a few were fully IT literate. Some Afghan officers still wore their Soviet ranks and medals. Many were authoritarian, lazy bullies. Just agreeing on what day of the week it was offered challenges as the Afghan Army insisted on using the unique Afghan calendar which differed both from the Islamic and Gregorian calendars. It was unsurprising that British guidance on mentoring the ANA philosophically concluded that it was an experience in sharing pain.

Every year the Helmand brigade was losing about 15 per cent of its manpower through soldiers going AWOL. As this was considered a loss of face for the commander, AWOL cases were kept 'on the books' and new recruits were not being accepted. Over a period of time this cumulative drain of manpower had obvious and deleterious effects on the overall manning levels. These levels of absenteeism tallied with the Soviet experience of raising an Afghan Army (also heralded as Russia's 'exit strategy'). In 1980 there were roughly 100,000 soldiers serving in the DRA (Democratic Republic of Afghanistan) Forces and 25,432 deserters.[665] In 1981 these figures climbed to 137,000 and 30,682 deserters. Three years into the experiment the Soviets had raised the total manpower to 200,000 but there were 42,554 deserters. By the time of the Soviet withdrawal the desertion rate had been reduced to 12 per cent but the game was up. A staggering 324,321 Afghans deserted from the Russian-sponsored Afghan armed forces, more manpower than ISAF even attempted to raise in its own experiment to create indigenous forces. Desertion was an old Afghan game that ISAF was never going to win.

To combat embezzlement, ANA pay started to be credited directly to accounts in the newly-established Kabul Bank. There were only two branches in all Helmand (a situation roughly comparable to having only two bank branches in an area the size of southern

England). As ANA recruits had little understanding or confidence in this foreign-imposed banking system (the centuries-old *hawala* system of remittances remained the basis of the overwhelming majority of everyday financial transactions in Afghanistan), pay day inevitably provoked stampedes and fights. Ordering an item of equipment involved filling in a notorious MOD Form 14 which then commonly travelled all the way back to Kabul for authorization before returning to the issuing unit. On average this process took three months. If the precious form got lost in the system, the whole process would start again. Many *kandaks* gave up on the MOD Form 14 system and simply relied on their own informal 'Nokia networks' (the mobile phone was the one form of communication in Afghanistan that undoubtedly worked). Afghan understanding of voice procedure was rudimentary. One weary British officer resignedly conceded: 'Despite constant reassurances that the operator at the other end will be able to hear them and pleading with them not to bellow down the radio, everything is conducted at the minimum volume of a shout'.[666] When the British took over the task of mentoring 3/215 Brigade they discovered that the brigade surgeon had still not reported for duty and the medical operations officer had gone AWOL. None of the purported medical staff held any medical qualifications whatsoever. All ANA vehicles were being maintained by American defence contractors, as were all the large pieces of military equipment like artillery guns.

All these not insignificant frustrations clouded the much bigger problem: ISAF's project to raise an Afghan Army was entirely based on American dollars, around $5 billion annually. The same trap had befallen the Soviets. At the end of 1985, when the decision was taken to withdraw from Afghanistan, Soviet military aid amounted to 516 million roubles.[667] When the withdrawal began three years later the figure had shot up to 1,629 million roubles. During the withdrawal the figure almost tripled to 3,972 million roubles. Converted to 2007 dollars, Soviet aid to Afghanistan from 1980-89 amounted to $29.7 billion or $1,980 per capita and 70 per cent of government income. International aid pledged to Afghanistan from 2002-09 amounted to the lesser figure of $1,346 per capita. This pipeline of Russian currency would be switched off, precipitating and accelerating the disintegration of Afghanistan. Like the Soviets before them an unsustainable edifice was being erected which depended on the largesse of the US Congress for the foreseeable future.

For the majority of British soldiers, contact with Afghans meant contact with the ANA or with their poor cousins, the ANP (later AUP, or Afghan Uniformed Police). As the former recruited heavily from non-Pashtun groups this meant that British soldiers were

predominantly dealing with Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen or Hazaras rather than with the ethnic group whose hearts and minds they were trying to win. Soldiers sent on crash courses in Pashto found that their interlocutors were in fact Dari speakers. The same dangers of ethnic divisions had faced the Soviet-raised Afghan army. In 1978, 70 per cent of the DRA Army was Pashtun. By the end of the war this figure had fallen to around 50 per cent with Tajiks and Uzbeks becoming predominant as the Soviet Army withdrew.[668] What began as an ideological struggle had been converted into an ethnic struggle by the Soviet recruitment policy. The modern ANA faced the same question. After the withdrawal of ISAF would these soldiers fight for their country, or for their ethnicities?

Even with the benefit of some basic language training any conversation beyond commonplace pleasantries almost always required the services of the TERPs or locally employed interpreters (many of whom lost life and limb in service with the British Army). By the middle of the war, the British Army was employing 630 Afghan interpreters.[669] Although not combat trained or armed, TERPs braved fire to help wounded soldiers and at least two received commendations for bravery. The MOD did not release figures for the number of TERP casualties but it is almost certain that a significant number were killed or seriously injured alongside the British soldiers they were helping. For some, employment with the British Army was a lifeline. For others it turned into a sour experience, viewed as traitors and in fear of their lives. A handful made the choice of seeking political asylum and found life equally tough in council flats in Glasgow and elsewhere. A necessary reliance on interpreters contributed to the illusion that ‘hearts and minds’ were being won. In *No Worse Enemy*, documentary-maker Ben Anderson recorded how interpreters routinely tried to save face by not translating honestly what the elders were telling Western soldiers. Too often, the villagers simply wanted the soldiers to go away, but this message was not passed. The experience left Anderson deeply disillusioned and convinced that Afghanistan was heading for another civil war.

A few (very few) soldiers became fluent native speakers, notably a marine who even blogged in Dari. In the first two years of the war there were no restrictions on British troops entering compounds to search, rummage or detain Taliban suspects. The locals they encountered were poor, deeply conservative and deeply suspicious. Few soldiers failed to be moved by the conditions of life endured by ordinary rural Afghans. Later in the war this vital insight was removed by a prohibition on Western soldiers entering Afghan homes. The main form of contact, other than random exchanges with farmers, was the shura – the traditional form of communal debate used throughout Afghanistan to resolve

disputes. The British got good at shuras and even wrote a doctrine note on the subject. Even so the experience still tested the physical and mental resources of some participants:

'All Shura's [sic] then require one to be a contortionist. Having removed your shoes you attempt to sit on the floor of your hosts' accommodation with your legs tucked away. For the first 10 minutes it's tolerable, within 15 minutes it's a mild form of torture and mentally you can only focus on the pain slowly creeping up your legs. Within 20 minutes you're no longer able to physically deal with the pain and you rudely start fidgeting, shitting [sic] your legs in as many different ways possible as to not show the soles of ones feet (an act the Afghans apparently find mildly offensive). Most Westerns in my opinion end up with the attitude of "sorry mate but between temporary paralysis and showing the soles of my feet I hope you're not a podiatrist [sic]?'[670]

The trick was not to get down to business too quickly. Afghans loved to talk and found Western urgency irksome. Telling jokes was another way to break the ice. One officer recalled telling a joke that seemed to leave his interlocutors in stitches, even though he struggled to understand the humour:

'Mullah Nasrudin said that he was as strong now as he had been as a youth. When asked for proof, he said, 'When I was a youth, there was a huge boulder that I was not able to lift. I am still not able to lift that same boulder, so you can see that I am as strong now as I was then'.'[671]

A strong stomach was another advantage. More than one British soldier found himself heading straight for the latrines following a well-fed shura. The key to these meetings, always, was never to promise what could not be delivered.

Whether or not the British were actually winning 'hearts and minds', there is no question that the majority of soldiers empathised with the locals, and, over time, this empathy was reciprocated. The violence of the early tours was eventually replaced with a more considered approach, although military operations always have a way of disturbing civilian life, as one officer humorously recalled:

'WO2 Whitehouse is certainly a big hit with the local nationals; they love seeing his wagon steam into view over the horizon leaving a trail of destroyed fields and flattened cooking pots.'[672]

As a result of these 'reckless meanderings', the nearby platoon was 'forced to act more

like an AXA Insurance than a rifle platoon, shelling out 10,000 Afghanis in compensation in one 24 hour period'.

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Death and wounding are facts of war. For British soldiers deploying to Helmand there was the sober knowledge that some amongst their number would be returning home on an aero-medical evacuation flight or worse, in a coffin. This was a novelty to an army used to peacetime soldiering but the soldiers at least had the reassurance that military medical care had improved dramatically since their forefathers had gone to war. This orthodoxy however, which every soldier carried, was less obvious than it seemed.

Battlefield casualty analysis is an area of study fraught with difficulties. It has traditionally used four possible measures: the number or incidence of wounded; the percentage of deaths amongst all battle casualties; the ratio of killed and wounded; and the percentage of wounded who die of their wounds. All these measures do not carry equal weight. Poor data and the political imperative to demonstrate that soldiers are better cared for than in previous generations has also tended to muddy the true picture of battlefield medical care.

An historical problem with the first measure – the total number of wounded soldiers – had been defining what counts as a wound. Military record keeping varies significantly on this point with the inclusion of lightly wounded figures making overall medical care appear better than it actually is. A more useful measure has been the percentage of deaths amongst all wounded men. In the Second World War, 27 out of 100 seriously wounded, subsequently died. In the Korean War this ratio was reduced to 22 out of 100. In the Vietnam War an almost identical ratio was recorded, 23 out of 100.[673] A question with this measure had been defining 'seriously wounded'. As with the incidence of wounded, a broad definition flattered the final ratio. In more recent times a measure that became favoured was the ratio of wounded and killed, or the WIA:KIA ratio. In the Second World War the US WIA:KIA ratio had been 4.1/1. In Korea this was reduced to 4:1 and in Vietnam, 3.4/1.[674]

This simple ratio failed to account for probably the most important measure – as least as far as a soldier was concerned – and that was the percentage of wounded who 'Died of Wounds'. Data from the Second World War onwards showed that this percentage had barely changed, despite unarguable improvements in medicine, quicker evacuation and the deployment of intensive medical care facilities to the frontline. The probable explanation

was the ‘Morrisey Effect’, named after an American surgeon who served at Anzio. Early and better intervention was increasing the number of battlefield survivors, but it was also increasing the mortality rate because these survivors were subsequently dying from their unsurvivable wounds in the field hospitals.

Data from all wars clearly and somewhat obviously demonstrates that survivability rates are related to the location of the body hit and type of weapon employed. Head and chest injuries have the highest mortality rates: in Vietnam, 34-46 per cent of battlefield deaths were due to head injuries, despite the fact that the head only represents 9 per cent of ‘the human target’.[675] This figure rose to 83 per cent of all battlefield deaths when head, neck and chest injuries were added. British statistics from Malaya show a similar pattern: there was an extremely high mortality rate from head and chest injuries. With inferior medical evacuation facilities and medical care, overall mortality rates were also higher; 29 per cent of British casualties were killed in action. Of the wounded, 7.6 per cent subsequently died, about half before they reached a hospital. And of those admitted to hospital 5.8 per cent died.[676]

When a high velocity missile – a bullet or shrapnel – strikes the human body a dramatic sequence of physiological changes follow the unhappy collision. Human tissue comprises about 70-80 per cent fluid. A bullet passing through the human body exerts tremendous hydrodynamic pressures: the bow wave breaks blood vessels, concusses nerves, shatters bones and detaches muscle. Tissue is both crushed and stretched. The wound tract itself leaves a permanent cavity of necrotic tissue, described by the passage of the bullet, and an ogival temporary cavity of debrided tissue that can be up to twenty centimetres wide. Bullet deformation or yawing increases these effects, as well as increasing the size of the exit wound. In the case of irregular shaped pieces of shrapnel the opposite effect is observed. A square or triangular shaped high velocity missile striking the human body can cause an entrance wound thirty times the diameter of the exit wound – it splits open human tissue like a hammer smashing a melon.[677] A human body struck by a high velocity penetrating missile experiences a heamodynamic response (the restriction of blood flow to the injured parts and extremities, and an increased flow to the vital organs). This can be lifesaving, especially when reinforced by environmental cold, as happened in the Falklands Conflict, where severely injured soldiers lay in freezing conditions – twenty hours in one case – before being evacuated, and survived. Hypovolemic shock is also experienced, which can only be countered by intravenous fluid supply.

Whether bullet or shrapnel, the human body is ill-equipped to receive this sudden

energy transfer. At the end of the 19th century, the German Army developed what became known as the 78 Joule criterion. This was adopted by the US Army and spread universally. A more sophisticated RII (Relative Incapacitation Index) later superseded this measure. The simple significance of the criterion was this: a missile with 78J of energy will perforate the human body and cause incapacitating damage. To give an example, a standard 5.56mm round weighs in the order of four grams. At a typical battle range of 200 metres it may be flying with a residual velocity of 740 m/s. Applying $KE = ½ MV^2$, this bullet would transfer 1,480J of kinetic energy to a human body. This is essentially why an object no bigger than a human fingernail – a bullet – knocks human beings flat.

For soldiers in Helmand, however, the majority cause of wounding was not the bullet – it was the roadside bomb or IED. Sheep make good models for the human body in blast research, as do pigs, more commonly used for ballistic wounding research. Despite the high explosive carnage of the first and second world wars, it was the arrival of the atom bomb with its dramatic blast effects that stimulated research in this area. The results from these studies were perhaps predictable. The maximal intrathoracic overpressure that a human body can stand is low. A piglet exposed to a mere 60 grams TNT detonation against its chest dies within minutes.[678] Human lungs can tolerate about 15 psi g of overpressure.[679] At about 40 psi g there is severe lung injury. The typical main charge of an IED in Helmand was a buried plastic container containing as much as 10 kilograms of homemade explosives, or old artillery shells or mortar bombs. A detonating artillery shell showers between 1,000-2,000 fragments travelling at between 4,000-6,000 feet per second within its blast pattern (typically a butterfly shape). An exposed human body in close proximity to the blast of an artillery shell stands little chance of survival from the combination of blast and shrapnel injuries. Complete or near-total amputation of limbs inevitably occurs at the point of detonation. These effects are to an extent reduced if the explosive charge is buried, causing kinetic energy transfer to the surrounding ground, but not sufficiently to protect the human body from serious injury.

To ensure the best survival prospects for soldiers a three part strategy needed to be implemented: better personal protection; better immediate care at the moment of injury; and rapid evacuation to a field hospital. In all three areas, dramatic improvements were made in Helmand.

Soldiers cursed the weight of the Osprey body armour that was issued to them but it unquestionably saved lives. There were numerous incidents involving soldiers shot in the armour plates and surviving the encounter with no more than severe bruising. The number

of fatalities from IED attacks would almost certainly have doubled or tripled if it had not been for the weighty carapace of armour worn by every soldier operating ‘outside the wire’. By the end of the war, a three figure number of soldiers had been struck on the Osprey body armour and owed their lives to the protective plates. The melancholy consequences of survival were many more amputees who would have died in previous wars. Just one British triple amputee is believed to have survived the First World War. By the mid-point of the war in Helmand, Britain had over 100 single and double amputees and nearly twenty triple amputees in medical care. A year before withdrawal the number had climbed to 207. The British Army had also experienced its first ever, surviving quadruple amputee. Jacobean playwright John Webster wrote ‘for a soldier that hazards his limbs in a battle; nothing but a kind of geometry is his last supportation’.[680] This was still true in the 21st century, but the geometry of an amputee was now supported by the best technology allowing these maimed soldiers to rebuild their lives and pursue activities that would have been unthinkable even a generation past.

The political implications of the Osprey body armour cannot be overstated. If the armour had not existed Britain’s war in Helmand would not have lasted as long as it did. It would have been difficult to imagine a Labour government entering the 2010 general election with a British body count of five or six hundred hanging over its head. Osprey body armour was viewed by some as a political procurement designed to save a government that had become hyper-sensitive to allegations that it was negligent over soldiers’ lives. Ironically it then became the very instrument that kept British soldiers at war experiencing politically acceptable fatality rates.

The military had always spoken of ‘the golden hour’, a phrase borrowed from civilian paramedic practice. If a casualty could be taken from the point of injury to an operating table, within an hour, his chances of survival greatly improved. In fact, in Helmand, this ‘golden hour’ was commonly not achievable: the average casevac time in the first half of the war was over an hour and a half. In the second half of the war, this time did improve. Now the military spoke of ‘the platinum 10 minutes’. This was the immediate first aid rendered to a serious trauma casualty by the combat medics on the front line. First aid in the army had previously been taught in an amateurish manner – the lack of real experience in war had diluted the urgency of this vital skill. During the thirty year campaign in Northern Ireland, soldiers carried a single, Second World War-era field dressing in their jacket pockets – there was no sense that this aspect of soldiering needed to be drastically improved. The war in Helmand, by contrast, transformed British Army first aid practice.

Army combat medics now had the tools (American tourniquets, ‘quick-clot’ bandages and Celox gauzes) as well as the skills to save lives that would otherwise have been lost within minutes of injury. Countless lives were saved by soldiers applying simple techniques and critically staunching blood loss in the first minutes following a traumatic injury.

Britain also went to war with rudimentary medical defence services (not treatment) in Helmand and a barely adequate military medical infrastructure back home. The damage was done in the 1994 ‘*Front Line First, The Defence Costs Study*’ that witnessed a number of key defence functions, such as the medical services, privatised under the newly fashionable Private Finance Initiatives, or PFIs. A former air marshal and general were moved to write in the *RUSI* journal:

‘As more and more specialist tasks were moved to the civilian sector, so the availability of uniformed, trained specialists fell. For some specialisations this trend could prove to be catastrophic in the long term. For example the review resulted in the ability of the military medical services to support military operational deployments being virtually eliminated.’[681]

The two senior officers were exactly right and the situation provoked a scandal demanding improvements that were quickly implemented as the casualties mounted. So-called ‘Role 1’ facilities were expanded throughout all the main operating bases, forward operating bases and some of the larger patrol bases. These provided primary health care and pre-hospital emergency treatment. ‘Role 2’ and ‘Role 3’ facilities that offered surgical care were established at the main operating bases along with dental, physiotherapy and mental health facilities. These offered intensive care as well as high-dependency treatment, x-ray, CT and laboratory facilities. The main UK hospital was the Anglo-American Role 3 hospital at Camp Bastion, also supported by Danish and Estonian medical personnel. Although the main priority of this hospital was to treat the military wounded it also handled hundreds of civilian casualties injured in the fighting or in other ways. In any one deployment over 400 British military medical staff were based in Helmand, the majority located in Camp Bastion.

As a result of successive defence cuts the medical services of the armed forces (now amalgamated and re-named the Defence Medical Services) were about 6,500 strong. To support the war the DMS inevitably had to call on the services of reservists as well as the National Health Service. Scores volunteered over the course of the war providing vital manpower.

The outrage that Lieutenant Colonel Tootal experienced when he witnessed the shabby treatment offered to his injured paratroopers in Britain was addressed by a nervous Labour government, keen to improve its tarnished image with the electorate. At any one time there were between 60-75 injured military personnel in NHS hospitals. To cope with the constant influx of patients, five MOD hospital units were established across Britain. The main unit was Selly Oak Hospital, part of the University Hospital Birmingham Foundation Trust. Selly Oak became synonymous with the agony of families making the difficult journey to the bedside of a son or husband, now wrecked, missing limbs or in a coma. These destroyed young men would find themselves in the Military Managed Ward, based in the trauma and orthopaedic wards. The Military Managed Ward, as its name suggested, had a military ward manager and military nurses. This single measure – separating military from civilian patients – boosted morale enormously. What injured soldiers needed, as much as the expert medical treatment, was the sense that they were still part of the military family. The psychological value of being able to share experiences with fellow injured soldiers was unquantifiable. Food was also improved and to assist the distraught families of injured personnel at Selly Oak, three flats for overnight accommodation were provided by the wartime charity SSAFA. In 2010, the facilities at the University Hospital Birmingham Foundation Trust were expanded with the opening of the £545 million Queen Elizabeth Hospital, the largest acute trauma hospital in Europe. This also included a Military Managed Ward with thirty beds as well as facilities for rehabilitation. A purpose-built accommodation block was added for military families within walking distance of the hospital.

The other medical facility that became synonymous with the war was the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre at Headley Court. Over time Headley Court gained the holy status of places like Craiglockhart from the First World War. Around 300 staff worked at Headley Court teaching the severely injured how to walk again, how to hold a spoon with a prosthetic arm, or how to articulate words through a shattered jaw. In typically British fashion several charities committed to improving the facilities at Headley Court (which was itself owned by a charitable trust). These included the massively successful Help for Heroes as well as older charities like the Royal British Legion, SSAFA and the Army Benevolent Fund. British governments have always been fortunate that volunteer citizens rise to serve in times of crisis. Headley Court grew to become a world-class rehabilitation centre. The credit went entirely to the dedicated staff that nursed, coaxed and encouraged the wounded back into re-starting their now terribly changed lives. By 2011 it was clear that Headley Court could no longer cope with the growing roll call of the disabled, or

expand, and a decision was taken to create a Defence Rehabilitation Centre in the Midlands. For many, Headley Court would always remain the place that restored them to life. A symbolic reversal of the 1994 decision to privatize Defence Medical Services came in May 2014 when the Duchess of Cornwall opened a £138 million facility for defence medical training in Whittington, Staffordshire. This also served as the new headquarters for Defence Medical Services. The funding and management of the facility was, of course, multifaceted - DMS Whittington was not a 'renationalisation'. But it was an important commitment and it signalled that a British government was once again re-investing in this critical service.

Physical wounds were visible. Mental wounds were not. Unlike the long campaign in Northern Ireland (and the short but intense Falklands Conflict) there was a recognition in the armed forces that shell shock – known by its modern clinical name of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – was a real and long-term problem for some soldiers that had experienced traumatic events. Training to identify and to deal with PTSD in Helmand was vastly improved. Mostly this involved re-learning old lessons. Courage was like a bank account and the stress of continuous fighting (and the ever-present threat of IEDs) depleted that account rapidly. Everybody had a threshold. Just giving individual soldiers a short break from frontline duties could make all the difference. For the longer term care there were fifteen military Departments of Community Mental Health (DCMH). The DCMHs were established in regions where there were large military garrisons. By the middle of the war, they had sprung up in Aldershot, Brize Norton, Catterick, Colchester, Cranwell, Donnington, Kinloss, Leuchars, Marham, Faslane, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Tidworth, Belfast and Woolwich. The geographical spread of the DCMH ensured that soldiers could receive mental health care closer to their base stations which perhaps provided the best, intangible mental health care simply by keeping them within the bosom of the regiment. Specialist and dedicated psychiatric care was provided by the National Health Service as the armed forces had long lost this independent capability.

For many, it was the upset of witnessing civilian deaths, and in particular children, that caused mental turmoil. One example was the experience of Sapper Ryan Pavey, a bomb disposal operator deployed on the notorious Route 611 on Operation Herrick 15. The clearance teams had closed off a section of the road, but an Afghan minibus carrying eighteen women and children ignored the block and tried to drive around the soldiers, triggering a massive IED. There were only five survivors.[682] Ignoring the threat of secondary IEDs, Pavey rushed to the destroyed van found and found a four-year old boy

with a severed leg. His prompt actions saved the boy's life. In his words: 'It's harder when the casualties are civilian…when you deploy you have to ready yourself for the possibility of soldiers being injured, but seeing a child hurt is a lot harder than seeing a grown up'. For this selfless act, Pavey was awarded a Queen's Commendation for Bravery.[683] Incidents like this, incidentally, revealed the great gap in attitudes towards saving life that existed between soldiers and an obsessive culture of health and safety back in Britain. First responders in the London Underground bombings were delayed from attending to the victims because of an unfounded fear of secondary bombs. Pavey *knew* there was a high likelihood of secondary devices, and still acted.

For others, like Guardsman Jordan Pearson, mental turmoil followed physical injury. Caught in an IED blast, Pearson suffered a range of serious wounds: his rifle muzzle was driven into his chest, narrowly missing his heart; his radio was driven through his arm; and his back was peppered by shrapnel. The explosion killed a colleague, wounded another, and left him without trousers, shredded and blown off his body. In his words, dealing with the aftermath of this incident proved a difficult experience:

'Everyone says just man up, and that's what I had been doing for so long, but it came to a point where I couldn't man up any more. I had to go get help to get through it because it was only going to get worse, not better. I was short-tempered and angry, drinking too much and arguing, and I was having difficulty sleeping. I was getting paranoid about sleeping in the same room as the other blokes in case they took the mick out of me for screaming in the night from the nightmares.'[684]

Thanks to an understanding family, not least his wife Loren, Pearson was encouraged to seek treatment for his diagnosed 'survivor guilt'. While acknowledging that there would be no quick therapy, over time, the guardsman found that he began to experience 'more good days than bad'.

PTSD would always remain an extremely vexed and controversial subject. If in previous generations any signs of weakness were interpreted as 'malingering', in the modern age, the readiness to diagnose PTSD (with its potential financial compensations) caused great debate. A proportion of British soldiers went to war already handicapped by mental health problems, mild or severe, provoked by drugs dependency (alcohol or clinically-prescribed drugs), dreadful backgrounds, and problems with personal relationships. Commanding officers were routinely surprised by medical officers when it was explained to them how many of their soldiers were dependent on prescribed drugs for one ailment or other. In the end it would always prove difficult to separate true shell shock

victims from soldiers suffering from a range of other problems, and for whom PTSD had become a useful crutch and potential route to handy compensation payments. Perhaps this was beside the point – a soldier suffering from mental health problems, whatever the cause, deserved mental health treatment.

Despite perennial and critical media articles on this subject, clinically diagnosed soldiers with mental health problems never rose above one per thousand servicemen. This was not only a testament to enlightened attitudes and better treatment but also perhaps reflected the nature of the war in Helmand. Academic Joanna Bourke's study *An Intimate History of Killing* remains the outstanding work on men engaged in warfare in the modern period.[685] Many of the features of wars that cause subsequent mental health problems, identified by Bourke in her book, were simply absent in Helmand: the enemy was largely invisible and civilian deaths were actually very uncommon and also mostly unseen. No British soldier experienced his regiment wiped out, in the manner of the First World War, or witnessed widespread civilian destruction as happened in the Second World War. Own casualties were traumatic but ultimately very few compared to the great wars. There was surprisingly little vindictiveness or hatred – the most common sentiment expressed about the Taliban was a grudging sense of respect, although IEDs were always perceived as an underhand way to wage war, and some soldiers did develop an antipathy towards the insurgents. There was no great sense of betrayal at home even if more educated and sceptical officers and soldiers questioned the rationale for the war. In this sense, the war in Helmand was 'a good war' that was always *unlikely* to result in numerous psychological casualties. This contrasted with the war in Iraq which did leave a bitter aftertaste in the army.

By the end of the 20th century Britain's military medical infrastructure, which had grown from the experience of the two world wars, had almost entirely vanished. The last military hospital, in Aldershot, closed in the 1990s. This infrastructure had to be rebuilt, and quickly. There was almost an exact counterpoint to this inability to provide adequate medical care to the incapacity of Britain's defence industry to provide soldiers with the vehicles and weapons they needed. In the latter case, foreign firms filled the pressing need for war materiel and made handsome profits. In the former case, the government had to start virtually from scratch falling back on the civilian National Health Service infrastructure. Ministry of Defence Hospital Units or MDHUs were established at Derriford, Frimley Park, Peterborough, Northallerton and of course at Selly Oak.

In addition to Headley Court, Regional Rehabilitation Units (RRUs) were also

established at Aldergrove, Aldershot, Bulford, Catterick, Colchester, Cranwell, Edinburgh, Halton, Honnington, Lichfield, Plymouth and Portsmouth. Headley Court would always draw media attention. The staffs who worked in the RRUs remained the unsung heroes who faced the difficult challenge of helping wounded and disabled soldiers over the long term. Unwilling to discharge disabled soldiers on ethical grounds, the army found itself with an increasingly large number of these soldiers for whom some useful employment had to be found. The triple amputee Tom Neathway was an example. A clerical job was found for this former sniper at No 1 Parachute School at RAF Brize Norton. The ex-paratrooper eventually became a primary school teacher. Others struggled to overcome their disabilities.

The RRUs developed into Personal Recovery Units (PRUs), of which eleven were proposed. These eventually became four Army Personnel Recovery and Assessment Centres (PRACs).[686] The first was Redworth House in Edinburgh. The second was built at Colchester Garrison and included residential accommodation for twenty-nine soldiers and thirty-one day attendees. The building's capital costs were funded by Help for Heroes, while the Royal British Legion agreed to meet running costs. The sums involved were huge: Help for Heroes committed a total of £70 million and the Royal British Legion committed £50 million over ten years. This represented its largest single contribution in its 90-year history – a reflection of the manner in which public attitudes to soldiers were transformed during the war. To cope with the growing number of amputees, following the Murrison Review in 2011, another £15 million was set aside by the government to provide enhanced prosthetic services to injured servicemen.[687] As Prime Minister Cameron put it: 'They deserve nothing less'.

Despite the uncertain start and lack of infrastructure, the provision of medical care on Operation Herrick became one of the unqualified successes of the war. World first and world class medicine was given to the wounded. Important lessons were learned that increased the sum of knowledge of battlefield medicine. One of the most effective innovations was an aggressive transfusion protocol based on a 1:1 ratio of red cell concentrate (RCC) to Fresh Frozen Plasma (FFP), with Platelet Component support when needed. This proved highly effective in reducing coagulopathy, one of the lethal triads in massive trauma victims.

No better tribute could be paid to the doctors and nurses of Camp Bastion Field Hospital – British, American, Danish and Estonian – than the statistic that 98 per cent of the casualties that passed through the doors of this hospital lived.[688] The 'Morrisey Effect'

could not be beaten, but the battlefield medicine practised at Camp Bastion hospital, coupled with better personal protection, reduced the number of wounded who subsequently ‘Died of Wounds’ to an historical low.

For the wounded soldier, the reassurance that casevac had finally arrived was signalled by the sound of helicopter rotor blades. Operating miles from the nearest field hospital, the war in Helmand, like the war in Vietnam, relied wholly on helicopter casevac. This was a complete reversal of years of British doctrine that taught a complicated system of casualty collection points and ambulance collection points on the battlefield. Generations of staff college students dutifully learned these medical evacuation diagrams that proved inappropriate to the realities of war in Afghanistan.

The risks undertaken by the casevac helicopters were immense, not least because the helicopters were unarmed and bore prominent Red Cross symbols which the Taliban used as aiming marks. Some 60 per cent of these air ambulances would be engaged by insurgent fire and the British would take to accompanying the casevac helicopters with a pair of Apache to offer protection. In 2010 an American escort helicopter protecting the casevac of wounded Royal Marines would be shot down over Sangin. In the same year a British Chinook pilot was shot in the helmet, the round ricocheting off and splitting the helmet shell but fortunately failing to seriously injure the stunned airman. The Taliban should have downed many more helicopters. Luck and pilot skill saved the day.

British casevac was undertaken by MERTS or Medical Emergency Response Teams using the wide-bodied Chinook helicopter (in Iraq, the Merlin was used for this purpose). The British were proud of the MERT concept, judging they had got the balance right between getting the casualty as quickly as possible to surgery (the American practice) and providing life-saving capabilities on the aircraft itself. Unlike any other casevac helicopters, the British MERTs offered blood and plasma transfusion, ventilation, and hypothermia prevention capabilities. A MERT helicopter, medical team and Quick Reaction Force (QRF) were on permanent duty twenty-four hours a day, seven days of the week, at Camp Bastion. On average, MERTs were called out four or five times daily. The medical team included an emergency specialist, an anaesthetist and two medical nurses. It was a relentless job made more difficult in cases involving mass casualties. The target was to achieve ‘wheels up’ within ten minutes of receiving a ‘9 Liner’ or casualty evacuation request. This was almost always achieved. The real delays in casevac were imposed by the difficulties of securing a safe EHLS or Emergency Helicopter Landing Site. Although there was a certain national bravado over which pilots were the most ‘cabby’, the fact was

that pilots of all nationalities took great risks at some point to recover Category A casualties, ignoring the safety norms and landing under fire to make the vital rescue.

Recovering the casualty was just the start. The back of a Chinook was noisy, dusty and dark. The frame vibrated and the floor became slippery with blood. Yet these were the vital moments when a wounded soldier had to be stabilised before being admitted to surgery. On landing at Camp Bastion ambulances would then rush the wounded across a 200 metre strip to the field hospital. Nobody who worked on the MERTs could fail to be moved by the sad cargo of broken bodies recovered on a daily basis from the front lines. Lieutenant Colonel Ian Nesbitt - in civilian life a consultant anaesthetist in Newcastle upon Tyne - soberly observed: 'I have seen more trauma here in a few weeks than I would see in 15 years in the UK'.[689]

With the arrival of American reinforcements more medical helicopters joined the airborne ferrying service of the wounded and killed in the form of UH60L 'Dustoffs' and HH60 'Pedros' ('Dustoff' was the call sign of the first medical helicopter shot down in the Vietnam War, the nickname has persisted in its honour).[690] These latter were crewed by highly trained USAF personnel (known as 'PJs') with a reputation for conducting hazardous rescue missions. PJs held American civilian registration as paramedics making them probably the best qualified airborne paramedics in the world. One Pedro helicopter suffered an RPG hit that tore through its tail, fortunately missing the transmission. Another team of PJs found themselves donning scuba diving gear to recover a drowned casualty.[691] The PJs had a nickname for the killed – they called them 'angels'. One PJ who served with 2 Rifles in Sangin summed up their robust attitude to life on the frontline:

'I'm not a political guy. While I wish that there were more helicopters to do the job better, I don't give a shit why or how. All I know is that I was glad to be one of the guys that made sure that so many will get to be with one of their families again.'[692]

Medical treatment and evacuation was also offered to Afghan civilians and the Taliban, an experience probably as disorientating as the original injury. As one medical squadron remembered, the range of Afghan patients was very wide:

'Our case mix has been impressive, not least because of the bizarre array of accidents and emergencies that occur among the local population, for which care is often sought here. We have treated – both out on patrol and in the DC compound – injuries including domestic burns in babies and young children; an opium overdose in an infant who drank 'poppy washings'; victims from road traffic accidents, including a child run over by his

father's tractor; anaphylaxis from an insect-sting; scorpion bites; electrocutions; 'punishment shooting' gunshot wounds; a stabbing resulting from a family row; and a dramatic suicide attempt involving a large knife and a wheelbarrow.'[693]

he saddest case the medical staff had to deal with was a child quadruple amputee.

Over the course of the war, Camp Bastion Role 3 Hospital treated hundreds of Afghans and saved countless of lives. This workload was augmented by a legal requirement to give a medical check-up to any detainees picked up by British forces. This added hundreds more cases in every brigade rotation. In any one week, Bastion's three surgical tables were witnessing on average 120 hours of life-saving surgery.[694] By far the biggest case load was provided by routine medical problems: every six months, the close support medical regiment had to deal with around 30,000 ailments of one type or other. It was like running the busiest of National Health Service hospitals with the added burden of a daily intake of multiple trauma casualties.

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One of the fascinating changes in the British Army serving in Helmand was the growth of religious sentiment. The peacetime army reflected society and Britain had become an irreligious island with poor church attendance. Perhaps one in ten of the population attended a religious service, but some studies suggested that perhaps it was as few as one in twenty. As a result, the role of the padre had shrunk to near irrelevance. During the Second World War, padres were ubiquitous – the sheer number of battlefield burials meant every unit needed a padre. Padres had won four Victoria Crosses and over 400 Military Crosses, more than would be awarded to the army as a whole for the entire war in Helmand. The last famous padre had been 2 Para's padre in the Falklands Conflict, David Cooper, a tough character who fitted in with the airborne ethos and who later went on to teach at Eton College. In the modern army they had become nearly invisible. The war in Helmand (and Iraq) once again raised the importance of the padre as an indispensable figure in a fighting unit. Soldiers who would never normally attend a religious service found themselves queuing to pray at makeshift altars in dusty frontline chapels. A Major Richard Streatfield serving with the Rifles put it this way:

'Riflemen are not usually a religious bunch but I can guarantee more prayers have been offered in the last six months than ever before. Early in the tour I heard a section praying before they went out. "Lo, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death…" it was moving and frightening at the same time. One of our soldiers who was

killed in action had a prayer found in his helmet. No one carried or wore a crucifix in UK, now they are as common as not. One doesn't find too many atheists on the battlefield.'[695]

The influence of one group of colonial soldiers – the Fijians – played its part in redeeming religion amongst the cynical British soldiery. The Fijians were not only deeply masculine – in an organisation that prized a cult of masculinity - they were also deeply religious. They sang moving laments to their fallen comrades and demonstrated to a teenager from Colchester, Liverpool or Leeds that you could be both soldier and religious. The cliché of Fijian 'gentle giants' was not far wrong.

Like all other services in the army, the Royal Army Chaplain's Department had suffered cutbacks. Finding sufficient padres to fill the growing need for religious succour proved a problem. Typical of the men who stepped forward to fill the vacancies was the Reverend Dr David Latimer, a Presbyterian minister from Londonderry in Northern Ireland.[696] The Reverend Latimer was a Territorial Army officer, an indication of the lack of padres within the Regular Army. Within twenty-four hours of arriving in the province he was dealing with his first casualties, appropriately fellow Ulstermen from the Royal Irish. The padre proved an immensely popular figure riding a quad bike with its own call sign (13) and an identifying placard ('God's 2ic'). When his six month deployment ended, 400 soldiers attended his farewell service – an unthinkable church attendance only a few years previously. Back in Britain, thanksgiving and memorial services became packed. Cathedrals that had become museums and which reserved side chapels for the dusty colours of disbanded regiments once again witnessed ranks of soldiers passing through their portals.

The need for religious consolation had a visible symbol. Crosses began to spring up all over the province (causing no offence to the Muslim soldiers of the ANA). They were typically made from spent shell cases and served as monuments to the fallen whose names were inscribed at the base of the cross. Over time the crosses became formal places for remembrance and the base plaques filled with names. When the bases closed or were handed over to the Afghan army, the crosses and plaques were retrieved as if they embodied the very spirits of the men who had sacrificed their lives and whose names now glinted in bronze.

Like soldiers of all eras, British soldiers and marines serving in Helmand brought with them their own tribal language. A good soldier was someone who 'cracked on' or who 'smashed it out'. An idle or useless soldier might be referred to as a 'mong' or 'oxygen-thief'. Every soldier wanted to look 'ally'. An 'ally' soldier was 'warry' – he looked good

and ‘tooled up’ for battle. No soldier wanted to ‘stag on’ which inevitably implied a boring guard duty in a sangar. Soldiers ate ‘scoff’ in the ‘cookhouse’ and marines ate ‘scran’ in the ‘galleys’. Everyone crawled into a ‘doss bag’ (sleeping bag) at the end of the day.

Despite constant education to the contrary the sexist biases of the average soldier could not be wholly transformed by watching equal opportunities videos (which could barely compete anyway with the industrial levels of pornography watching in the army, as in civilian society). Female soldiers were sometimes labelled ‘oxygen-thieves’. This was unfair as female soldiers did serve on the front line and shared equal risks. More mature soldiers refrained from such casual sexism and appreciated the presence of female soldiers in the otherwise male-dominated landscape of Helmand. Despite comprising almost twelve per cent of the army’s strength, the proportion of deployed servicewomen was actually much lower (less than one per cent). This was not due to an unwillingness to serve but rather the insurmountable difficulties of deploying female soldiers to some forward bases. The weight problem was another factor. Fit young men were struggling to carry the loads imposed on soldiers. Asking female soldiers to bear the same weights was just not realistic in many cases. The problem of sexism had a darker side in the interactions with Afghan soldiers for whom a Western female soldier was a sexually exciting novelty. This was not helped by a cultural prejudice (greatly fostered by the widely available pornography) that Westerners were basically decadent. One servicewoman recalled being treated like exotica by Afghan soldiers:

‘Initially we were regarded with extreme curiosity as a unique female partnership. The more junior soldiers would just stare at us, whereas the officers looked at us with puzzled expressions and asked ‘why are you in the Army working with men if you are a girl?’ Having a mobile phone camera shoved in our faces every five minutes and having a swarm of ANA soldiers following us wherever we went turned into the norm. We were such a novelty to them, and everyone wanted to have their picture taken with us.’[697]

It was frustrating that servicewomen facing the many challenges of frontline service in Helmand also had to put up with such attitudes. Female soldiers were invaluable because they could interact with Afghan women without causing offence. In time, American-style FETs or Female Engagement Teams were established. Able Seaman Class 1 Kate Nesbitt became the first female to be awarded the Military Cross when she dealt with a casualty under fire. Many more servicewomen would follow in her footsteps and be similarly recognized for gallantry under fire. Courage was not a male attribute.

The peculiarities of military language were also evident in the enduring love affair with

acronyms, a trait memorably satirised by actor and comedian Robin Williams in *Good Morning Vietnam*. Soldiers themselves found the impenetrability of acronyms amusing, as this engineer recalled:

'The Regiment have just completed the BOO, prior to this the LSI, and before that the ECI…The BOWO has visited as well as the FOWO to advise us on jobs that must be completed ASAP. The TQ along with the RQ and RQ(T) advised the QM's and SQ's on the way forward. Lots of 6535's, 8088's, ARB's, P1954's, 1033's to be re-signed and checked …and if anyone can understand the above, please come and translate…'[698]

It was not just acronyms that were difficult to understand. A Falkland's generation soldier might have been called Thomas, Jones or McKay. In Helmand you were equally likely to find a Madratabuia, Raiola or Kuku. Nicknames also changed. They ranged from the traditional (Robbo, Scouse, Ginge), to the more exotic (Slumdog, Morgs and Stripper). Under the influence of American forces that owned the electromagnetic spectrum, traditionally dull British military call signs became suggestive of a mythological world peopled with cartoon characters: Maverick, Hades, Greeneyes, Brimstone and Ugly.

The war in Helmand did not produce a Wilfred Owen or Keith Douglas but more than one amateur poet was moved by the experience of warfare to express himself in verse. Perhaps the most unlikely such poet was Senior Air Craftsman Craig Blackwell who served in the humble role of fireman. Blackwell never saw action but a verse he wrote, *The Helmand Poem*, became a sort of unofficial epitaph for the British sacrifice in Afghanistan.[699]

In poppy fields you were to fall,

St Peter was to hear your call,

And take your soul for God to keep,

And help embrace that endless sleep.

Your friends will mourn,

Your wife will weep,

Your son will see you in his sleep.

You are another hero lost

Another son this war has cost.

And with your name upon the wall,

With other friends that were to fall,

And died upon their country's call.

In poppy fields they still stand tall.

The Helmand Poem was rivalled by a similar elegy to the fallen written by a Territorial Army soldier, Staff Sergeant Andrew McFarlane. He took as his subject the repatriation process, beginning with the manner in which the news of a death spread like wildfire through the task force:[700]

The news is spread far and wide

Another comrade has sadly died

A sunset vigil upon the sand

As a soldier leaves this foreign land.

And ending with the flag-draped body carried into the body of the waiting aircraft:

Reveille sounds and the parade is done

The hero remembered, forgotten by none

They leave to start the journey back

In a coffin draped in the Union Jack.

Such poems struck reflective tones. Others recorded the daily routine of patrolling the Green Zone, with a mixture of pride and reflection. The poem below was apparently penned by an unknown soldier, serving in B Company, Royal Gurkha Rifles in June 2010. The company at the time was deployed in a patrol base in Babaji District. It starts with a

conventional description of a soldier on patrol:

Each day the same, bright eyes they wait,
then rise and step through wired gates,
through wading streams, long grass and trees,
…legs bend and ache, eyes peer through sights,
the sweat drips down, and shoulders bite –

The fear of IEDs or ‘the hidden foe’ is acknowledged:

…the hidden foe – beneath the ground,
he gives no sight, nor makes no sound;
yet it is he who’s feared the most -
despite their weight, they tread like ghosts.

Then the direction of the poem turns and the author reflects on this latest war, universal in some ways, and in other ways greatly changed:

Think nothing’s fair, think nothing’s true,
think every day – it could be you,
yet laugh and sleep and eat and sing –
as if no cares, about a thing;

Above all, it is ‘the human nature’ of the British soldier the author applauds, not his thirst for battles ‘where blood will run’:

They talk of battles to be won,
though not the sort where blood will run…

For where else sees such selfless deeds

bestowed upon comrades in need:

for well they know their duties… to each other;

The poem concludes:

In half a year they wave goodbye;

and what will be their parting cry?

Their thankless task holds far less glory

than ‘Queen and Country’ – boyhood story,

Think only this: with heads held high,

that they were there – and so was I.

Another anonymous patrol base poet took the most famous poem in the English language on soldiering in Afghanistan (Kipling’s *Square*) and cleverly subverted it:

When the gimpy [machine gun] has jammed and you’re

Down to one round,

And the faith that you’d lost is suddenly found,

When the Taliban horde is close up to the fort,

And you pray that the arty don’t

Drop a round short…

Then, just as the reader thinks he is being led down a familiar path of stiff upper lips and straight backs, there is rude volte-face. All this, the author muses, for ‘three fifty an hour’, or less than the minimum wage; for a ‘missus at home in a foul married quarter’; for ‘damp on the walls and a roof leaking water’; and for children missing their father and ‘the childhood that they should have had’. The stern rebuke to Britain’s politicians ends:

The Brits will fight on ‘till the battle is over,

You may treat him like dirt but nowt will

Unnerve him,

But I wonder sometimes, if the country

Deserves him.

It could have been the words of a soldier fighting in the Crimean War, and many campaigns since.

More commonly soldier amateur poets were keen to express their bravado and toughness in the face of the enemy (and allies). Corporal Mark Blayney’s *The Blue DZ Flash*, a reference to 2 Para’s signature blue arm patch, was typical of the genre of paratrooper poems:

Not so long ago in a land far away,

The Taliban kept calling and they want to play,

We’ll need mortars and machine guns and everything in between,

Sod it! We’ll just send D Coy from the alley Maroon Machine.

First to Kajaki and then to Rob, and some to Gibraltar,

wherever there’s a FOB.

Wherever there’s a want or a need for the Taliban to smash

They do it because they love it and not for cash,

With their wings on show it was time to go and look alley

And as the RPG fly morale is still high,

This is not the job for Harry.

At the end of the day they asked to play,

And it's the Taliban that are crying today.

Then it's back to the FOB, known to all of us as ROB,

Which we share with some foreign guests.

We have Yanks and Danes and remote controlled planes,

But it's the PARA's that stand out the best.

Like Spartans they march, sweating and parched to the battle and whatever it may bring

With a blue DZ flash they are ready to smash……

'Ready for Anything'

The Blue DZ Flash may have displayed a mad metrical indiscipline but it made up for the clumsiness with enthusiastic dollops of unembarrassed airborne chest-thumping. This was amateur poetry at its best and worst. The audience was fellow paratroopers reading the battalion blog, not *Times Literary Supplement* critics. In 2011, the publishing house Ebury would collect one hundred war poems in *Heroes*, a book printed to raise awareness and money for service charities. There were no contenders for a modern version of *Dulce et Decorum* but the sincerity of the emotions expressed in the poems was undeniable.

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The Taliban also wrote verse, drawing on a long oral tradition of poetry in central Asia. In 2011, the publisher Hurst and Co collected 235 such poems and published them in Britain. This drew harrumphing criticism from a retired, senior army officer and regular contributor to *The Times* who argued that publishing enemy poetry was somehow giving wind to 'fascist, murdering thugs'. Setting aside the misuse of 'fascist', which revealed how little this individual seemed to understand of the complexity of the war in Helmand, the charge was silly. Some were love poems rooted in genres dating back to the 17th century. Many war ballads were universal and could have been penned by any soldier in any period. Tellingly, the editor of *Heroes*, a former army captain who had actually served on the front line, unlike the senior officer, had no difficulties with Taliban poetry, observing that the average British soldier had more empathy with his enemy, than with the politicians placing him in the firing line – which is another universal feeling shared by

soldiery.

Another popular verse form in Afghanistan was the *tarana*. These were ballads based on melodic folk music, usually delivered by one or more singers, without instrumental accompaniment.[701] A typical Taliban *tarana* went thus:

The wind of freedom has stirred up gusts in the north.

Hey, White Banner, wave now with dignity…

To Dasht-i Layli go fast with dignity…

Over those oppressed flap your wings with dignity…

Talk to that oppressed Talib with dignity:

Squalls of dust have fallen on your oppressors…

Well, if they killed Talib being in his young age and with dignity,

After they had gone, the lands of ancestors were kept intact with dignity…

These ballads became hugely popular amongst Afghans, even with those unsympathetic to the Taliban cause. They seemed to reach back to a central Afghan national myth of a simple, country folk ruined by the machinations of foreign powers. The place names and the names of commanders were familiar, and the spread of mobile telephones and MP3 players meant that even the most remote communities could be reached. Fascinatingly, according to the Afghan Ministry of Interior, all perpetrators of fratricidal killings of ISAF soldiers were found to have *taranas* downloaded on their mobile phones. The Taliban had once rejected modern technology, but now it was embraced. Taliban *tarana* videos began to appear on YouTube; at one stage over fifty could be viewed by the curious or committed. These were not minority viewing. One of the most popular featuring Mullah Omar had been downloaded more than 500,000 times. *Taranas* were studied by an American COIN Advisory and Assistance Team (CAAT). One of the researchers was surprised to observe that these ballads commonly drew tears from cultivated Afghans working with Westerners, and equated them to the popular ‘gangsta-rap’ on American city streets - these were the resistance songs of the downtrodden and alienated, whether in Char Coucha or Chicago.

Like the largely static First World War, soldiers found time to create frontline

newspapers. Several sprang up: the *Musa Qaleh Times*, the *Helmand Highlander* and the *Ripon Sapper*, to name three. The tone was always light-hearted and upbeat. Mostly the soldiers wrote to amuse themselves, their mates and their families. Ribbing each other was an obsessive past-time. Foreigners remarked on the ritual rudeness of the British, perhaps not appreciating that this rudeness was practically a national hobby. This entry by an old sweat who had gained a commission late in his career, was typical of the genre:

'I want to put some of the savaging to bed once and for all that I, the only LE (Late Entry) in Regimental Headquarters, have received from the DEs (Direct Entries) with which [sic] I work. For those who do not know the difference between DEs and LEs let me explain: DE - normally a rather spotty individual that is around 11 to 13 years old that the Army has decided to put in charge of men. Normally share a stack of drawers with someone else in RHQ. DEs eat stickies by the bucket load adding to their acne problem but do not worry, they eventually grow out of it at the age of 15 when they become a Major. LE - normally a man (yes, MAN) in his forties who has grown out of his acne problem and enjoys nutritious foods like fruit, nuts, seeds and certain boiled sweets in moderation, like Werthers Originals or the occasional Fisherman's Friend, just like his granddad used to buy him. Could actually be the granddad of a DE.'[702]

Surprisingly, the most notable difference between the Helmand frontline newspapers and the earlier genre typified by the *Wipers Times*, was that the Great War soldiers were far more subversive and critical than a popular image of a submissive and obedient generation suggests. The *Wipers Times* was peppered with criticism of officers and tactics ('Are you offensive enough?' was a standard joke). No Helmand author dared indulge in such questioning as it would have contradicted 'the narrative', or the spin of a successful mission. Nor would a modern soldier have dared craft jokes around a fictitious but identifiable General Bertram Rudolph de Rogerum, the inspiration, it may be surmised, for the character General Melchett in the comedy series *Blackadder*. In Helmand, lampooning your senior officers was as taboo as questioning the point of the war. This art, it should be added, has fortunately not died out. On exercises, where there are no political sensitivities, British Army officers and soldiers can still turn out some splittingly funny lampoons of each other and what they are up to.

The mismanaged war in Iraq had provoked extreme nervousness in the Labour government. If the government was now keen to restrict the amount of information leaking from Afghanistan, the enterprise was doomed to failure. Soon the British public was being treated to a rash of war memoirs that rolled off the printing press more quickly

than the brigades were rotating through Helmand (nearly thirty titles were published by the mid-point in the war). In this respect the war in Afghanistan was different to the ugly and messy confrontation in Basra. Afghanistan had all the appeal of a bygone imperial age and indeed the ancestors of these war memoirs were the late Victorian and Edwardian tales of derring-do that filled magazines like *Chums*, and newspapers like the *Illustrated London News* and the *Graphic*. The three previous Anglo-Afghan wars had generated a crop of books from protagonists keen to cash in on their experiences and this latest war was no different. The modern inspiration came from the lurid, sensational bestseller *Bravo Two Zero*, the book which set the house style for modern British war memoirs.

The Helmand war memoirs were packed with a mix of heightened truths and eye witness accounts of dramatic gun battles. The cinematic titles announced themselves like the tap-tap of a nine millimetre pistol: G*round Truth*, *Danger Close* and *Blood Clot* were typical examples. The succeeding pages were filled with the cacophony of whizzing bullets and exploding RPGs. Hardship, heat and dust served as the backdrop to the extraordinary events that were happening on this modern-day North-West Frontier. The general public was let into a whole new range of military acronyms like novitiates being offered a glimpse into a secret priesthood with its own arcane language. These books secreted testosterone and they sold like hot cakes.

Few of the authors questioned the merits or the direction of the war although the now retired Colonel Tootal did use his memoirs to make an impassioned plea for better treatment of serving and retired soldiers. Mostly they glorified the war. The reader was left in no doubt that one was a lesser person for not having served in the Queen’s colours and they no doubt acted as formidable recruiting agents. The Parachute Regiment was particularly successful at exploiting the seductive appeal of war memoirs. No less than four books appeared in very short order describing the exploits of 3 Para in the torrid summer of 2006. A soldier like Doug Beattie became a one-man advertisement for the heroics of the Royal Irish. Mick Flynn played the same role for the Household Cavalry.

If the war memoirs could be criticised for a certain, self-regarding macho streak, they could not be faulted for their candour. These were mostly the stories of soldiers speaking as soldiers and the stories they had to tell were mostly true, if jazzed-up. They faithfully portrayed the humour, the endurance and the surprising compassion of young men lifted from poor backgrounds, inculcated with military values, and sent to fight a war in a faraway land, like so many of their forebears. They told stories of indisputable heroism in an age when wartime heroics had almost become consigned to grainy, black and white,

world war movies. They seemed to redeem a youth that had become characterised as an empty-headed ‘Nintedo generation’. For a brief interlude Britain’s appalling drug, drink and teenage pregnancy statistics could be suspended by the thought that somewhere out there a teenager was risking life and limb in the service of his country. The Helmand war memoirs also served a more important purpose. They brought home to the casual reader that this truly was war. The levels of violence may not have been as great as that experienced in the Korean War, as was claimed, but they were certainly severe. Millions of bullets were being expended. Thousands of tonnes of high explosive were being dropped. A virgin army was being ‘transformed in contact’ as General Dannatt put it.

The war only produced one literary book, *The Junior Officers’ Reading Club*, written by a young Grenadier Guards officer who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan.[703] The outstanding examples in this genre lay in confessional classics like Phillip Caputo’s *A Rumour of War* and Ken Lukowiak’s *A Soldier’s Song*. The *Reading Club* lacked the weight of these predecessors, through no fault of the author. Caputo’s story was that of a young man failed by the promise of the Kennedy generation, set against the backdrop of the great tragedy of the Vietnam War. Lukowiak’s cathartic book described how over three violent weeks a young, gung-ho paratrooper’s world and values were turned upside down. Both men embraced war with a carapace of values that proved sham when faced with the reality of conflict. Both would suffer mental breakdowns. Patrick Hennessy’s experiences were very different both in scale and kind to these two former soldiers and owed more to books like Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*. Imbued with psychedelic sixties culture, *Dispatches* sanitised human suffering by re-casting it as a heavy acid trip. War could be beautifully weird and dreadful at the same time.

A central plank of the *Reading Club* was that this was a book spoken by an honest narrator. As a Balliol graduate in English Literature, Hennessy may have appreciated there is no such thing as an honest literary text – all art is artifice. Much of the work was actually not about war at all. Rather, it examined the psychological paradox of a young man with a profound aversion to the protocols of militarism – bullshit in common parlance – drawn to serve, for reasons of social prestige it had to be surmised, in a regiment of the Foot Guards where these very traits were most pronounced. In many ways the most vivid and entertaining section of the entire work described Hennessy’s passage through basic military training at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst – the pinnacle of the Guards ethos - an experience which he seemed to find at best irksome and at worst traumatic. This was the universal civilian protesting at the inanity of polishing boots until, as he put it,

your platoon sergeant could see his soul in them. Coyly, the author did not inform the reader that he was actually awarded the Queen's Medal at Sandhurst.

Hennessey seemed to arrive at the gates of the army carrying a backpack of upper-class ennui and made the unspectacular discovery that army life can be chronically boring for an intelligent and sensitive young man, even in wars ('bored' was a favourite word, and the sub-title 'Killing Time' was not accidental). The question 'Why on earth did I join the army?' did not appear anywhere in the work, but the thought tinted most pages. The genius of the book was in the observed details: the infantile pursuit of a campaign medal; the equally infantile lust to see 'action'; the panic at having to deal with soldiers' personal problems; the otherworldliness of palace duties; the undeniable surrealism of the soldiering experience; all set against a tapestry of literary references, as well as references to popular film and music. Hennessy's emotional confusion was the real story, a confusion that persisted after he left the army as he found himself drawn back to revisiting his old haunts like a troubled paramour. Hennessy also made an indecent discovery which he was not afraid to share with the reader – war could be 'fucking good fun'. The British operation in Helmand may have been an ersatz war (more British soldiers died in a single day in Normandy than in several years of fighting in Helmand, and even with the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the mortality rate in the British Army was lower than the mortality rate of the UK general population), but it had all the right ingredients to make it feel like a real war.

Scions of established military families began to speak out in national newspapers. The Pikes had served the nation as far back as the Boer War.[704] Captain Sydney Pike had served in the Royal Artillery in South Africa. A maternal grandfather, Major General Reginald Tompson had also served as a gunner in the Great War. A great uncle, the splendidly named Major Frank Thickness had died at Passchendaele. The tradition of serving in the artillery continued into the Second World War. A subaltern uncle died in North Africa and a second more fortunate relative rose to the rank of lieutenant general ending his career fighting in Korea. In the Falklands conflict, 3 Para was led by Hew Pike who would also retire with general rank. The last in the line, Will, served in the same battalion in the town of Sangin in 2006. What he witnessed provoked exasperation and early retirement. Much of what he later expressed revolved around familiar themes. Overall national policy was a shambles with no single government department driving the agenda. He charged the FCO and DfID with holding rival agendas. The resources given to the army were simply inadequate. The operation was 'farcical', 'irresponsible' and 'half-

cocked'. The lack of helicopters and the vulnerability of vehicles like the Snatch Land Rover were 'an absolute disgrace'. The multi-billion pound, new digital radio – the notorious Bowman procurement program that had been so badly mismanaged for over a decade – predictably failed the soldiers. Troops in isolated 'platoon houses' found themselves literally unable to communicate with anyone reliably. Damningly he criticised the very core of the operation: 'No real thought is going into what we are doing and why'. These were serious allegations from a family that had loyally provided sons for Britain's wars over several generations.

In an age of digital photography, imagery abounded in Helmand. Every soldier could be his own combat cameraman. Helmet cameras became popular, capturing the raw, unedited confusion of a gun battle through jerky shots and the cacophony of automatic weapons. It was such footage - passed to the media - that first alerted the British public in the summer of 2006 that the purported stabilisation mission in Afghanistan was going horribly wrong. On rare occasions a helmet camera captured the moment of detonation of an IED recording the awesome power of high explosives. 'Warry' videos were highly prized and video swapping became a cottage industry. All such footage legally belonged to the MOD. In an enlightened decision, the Ministry allowed the BBC to trawl through hundreds of hours of Helmand combat camera footage. The result was a three part series called 'Our War', screened in the summer of 2011 that vividly portrayed the realities of frontline soldiering. 'Our War' revealed the basic humanity of British soldiers that no amount of words could convey. Supplementing this work were popular series made by presenters like the television actor Ross Kemp who offered flattering but not dishonest documentaries of life on the front line.

Thousands of still photographs were taken by soldiers of their experiences in Helmand. The majority showed mates posing, lounging, cooking, larking about, and playing games – all the activities that make up the experience of soldiering. Team photographs were especially poignant as the fatality and wounding statistics implied that at least one of the faces in the line up was likely to end up in a hospital or mortuary. This body of photography captured in an unselfconscious way all the universals of warfare – youthful grinning faces, cockiness and war glamour, the squalor of the front line and the contrasting beauty of nature. This was the profound innocence of Larkin's 'MCMXIV' – 'never such innocence/never before or since.' Curiously, despite the obvious photogenic potential of the war in Helmand, no young Don McCullin came forward to make his name as a war photographer. The single Briton who was establishing himself as a classic war photographer, Tim Hetherington, tragically lost his life in Libya in the spring of 2011.

In Helmand, there was one outstanding exception to this rule. In 2007 Brigadier Mackay invited the London-based commercial photographer Robert Wilson to record 52 Brigade as war artist, not photographer. Wilson visited the brigade over a two week period armed with a large format Hassleblad and 35mm Cannon camera. Over this period he took over 12,000 images of which around 300 were selected for an exhibition and book, *Helmand: Faces of Conflict.*[705] In his own words:

'My days in Afghanistan were some of the most amazing of my life. It was a rare and fantastic opportunity to capture moments in time which were not only visually stunning but historic. I felt it was important to depict the war through the men who are fighting it, by portraying their world and giving a sense of how they live.'

The most intense period was a five day stint at Musa Qaleh where Wilson was able to witness and live life on the front line. The majority of the images chosen for *Helmand: Faces of Conflict* were drawn from this period.

Wilson's faces were arresting close-up portraits. They depicted exhausted soldiers, covered in dust, staring directly at the camera. Every face had a dulled, faraway look that spoke of combat fatigue. The use of large format prints revealed every crease and shadow in the worn faces. Photographed in flat winter sunlight, the resultant bleached look reinforced the sense that the sitters were living in a quite different and alien world. There was an undeniable painterly beauty to the opus that deservedly placed it as classic and not commercial war photography.

The war did offer opportunities for commercial photographers and agencies like Reuters commissioned visits to Helmand that added to the stock of war library images. The three services encouraged photographic competitions and amateur soldiers, sailors and airmen proved skilful and observant photographers. In one case, a retired Grenadier Guards captain, Alexander Allan, travelled to Helmand and created a photographic portrait of the war seen through the eyes of someone who had recently served.[706] A former marine, Sean Power, likewise swapped his rifle for a camera and returned to Afghanistan as the British Legion's first official war photographer. Although these former servicemen did not necessarily set out to glorify war there was in the bright, saturated colours, the details of weapons, and the macho poses, a sense that war was still sport and a rite of passage for young men bold enough to embark on the adventure. This contrasted with the work of former RAF officer Alison Baskerville who in 2012 produced a quite different and intimate body of work depicting the life of women on the frontline: bright coloured underwear, washing lines, painted toe nails, and dressing tables, 'the human element of

being a female soldier'.[707]

The trade of war artist - which emerged in Britain during the First World War as a powerful social as well as artistic record of conflict - was also practised in Helmand. Unlike photographers working in Helmand, an artist had to contend with tricky environmental conditions. In the Falklands Conflict, the war artist Linda Kitson had suffered numb fingers, driving sleet and strong winds. In Helmand the main challenges were the debilitating heat and dust. Two media suited these difficult conditions: acrylics inks and charcoal. Both were easily transportable, they produced quick results, and they could readily capture an often fleeting subject matter.

The artist who best exploited acrylics was the Territorial Army soldier and professional illustrator Matthew Cook. Cook was both a highly experienced soldier and artist. He served with 7 Rifles in the first Gulf War and subsequently undertook a commission for *The Times* newspaper in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. He returned to Iraq in the following year with the London Regiment, as a reservist. In 2006 he deployed to Afghanistan as the official war artist of The Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire Regiment and then returned again in the winter of 2009 as the brigade war artist in Helmand. Cook's main inspirations were the war art he had viewed as a young boy in the Imperial War Museum, and the influence of the British war artists Felix Topolski (under whom he served an apprenticeship), and John Piper. His ambition was to be artist as recorder:

'Unlike a lot of traditional war artists that are either anti-war or portraying a very spectacular battle or defeat, I'm not trying to achieve either of those, it is purely a record.'[708]

In this he was uniquely placed as his eye for accurate military detail was based on personal experience as a serving soldier. As he put it, he had no excuses: 'I do notice in other people's paintings if they get things wrong - if an ammo pouch is the wrong size or things generally don't look right'. His subject matter was the mundane, everyday lives of servicemen in a war zone: a soldier relieving himself along a row of urinals, the domestic details of soldiers having a brew or cooking, the boredom of sentry duty. His tools were just three primary colours, yellow, blue and red – and a set of brushes. The light in Afghanistan represented a stiff test for any painter but Cook was able to skilfully record both the spectacular sunsets and the deep shadows thrown by the blinding Afghan sun.

The other artist who left behind a valuable record of life on the front line was Arabella Dorman.[709] This Chelsea-based artist could not have picked a more difficult location or

time to practise her trade. In the summer of 2009 she spent a month with 2 Rifles at the Sangin District Centre. By the time this battalion recovered from the town in September, twenty-three soldiers had been killed and over 100 had been injured. Like the photographer Robert Wilson, Dorman had a talent for portraiture, and the medium she chose to capture her subjects with was charcoal and chalk. Doorman had previously spent some weeks with a Rifles battlegroup in Iraq so she was not entirely unfamiliar with soldiery. Nonetheless, the conditions and especially the fatalism of the soldiers deeply moved her. 'The riflemen were so young', she remembered, 'they were babies'.[710] Before going out on patrol - a moment of nervous tension - riflemen approached her to have their portraits drawn:

'They'd all come to me and say how fast can you do a portrait? And you'd know why they wanted it done. They would talk to me about 'if' I get back home, not 'when' I get back home.'

On another occasion when she drew an Afghan gardener working at the British base he miserably told her: 'You haven't captured the hate in my eyes. I love nothing and I have never known a day of peace'. One of the portraits she drew was of Rifleman Daniel Wilde, one of three teenagers that died together in a single incident when a patrol was struck by multiple IEDs. He had been carrying a wounded colleague when he stepped on a second IED. Doorman's work in Helmand was in the best tradition of classic charcoal and chalk portraiture. The artist Doorman was invisible in the works, her subjects - the young riflemen - almost tangible. Moved by her experience, she returned to Afghanistan the following year, and then re-visited the task force for a final trip before withdrawal. She entitled the exhibition of her paintings *New Dawn*. For all its travails, she judged Afghanistan faced 'the hope of a new day but all the uncertainty of what the day will bring'.[711]

Other artists would follow these two pioneers. In the winter of 2010 the Royal Tank Regiment invited the artist Mark Neville to record their tour. In that same winter the Royal Irish were followed by the artist Derek Eland who was inspired to create a 'memory board' project for the Imperial War Museum. In 2011, 3 Commando Brigade invited Andrew Miller to spend five weeks with the troops and his work was used to support the Not Forgotten Association and Royal Marines Charitable Trust Foundation.

Soldiers have always been necessarily fatalistic. There is probably no other way of coping with the knowledge that every day you wake up may be your last, or may end in terrible injury. Corporal Jim White, a Royal Marine on his third tour of Afghanistan,

described the surreal dislocation provoked by sudden death on the battlefield:

‘To see guys who one minute are in our gym working out doing pull ups and the next you are picking them up off the ground, limbless, it’s just a bizarre place, how quickly it changes for the blokes. It can happen in just a second.’[712]

This is what the average British soldier and marine had to face whenever he stepped outside the front gate of his patrol base. At the vast MOD depot at Ashchurch, two aircraft-sized hangars were reserved for casualty vehicles from the war. These were recovered to Britain, like their former occupants, for coroner reports and forensic examination. The row upon row of split and shattered vehicles was a sobering sight. For a soldier contemplating this wreckage of war the question was always: what are my chances?

At the beginning of Operation Herrick the intensity of the fighting had been compared to that experienced in the Korean War. This was an exaggerated comparison. As in all wars, risk depended on where you were serving and your role. It was nonetheless the case that the British Army in Helmand experienced a casualty rate that it had become quite unused to and this was both an institutional and personal shock. Every six month rotation routinely resulted in the loss of a battalion’s worth of soldiers to combat and non-combat injuries (a deficit that was in part compensated by the battalion’s worth of Territorial Army soldiers who volunteered for active service). From 2009, battle casualty replacements and reinforcement companies had to be deployed to Helmand to make up the losses. 3 Commando Brigade on Operation Herrick 9 estimated that only 80 per cent of the deployed force was actually available to the task force commander at any one time because 7 per cent were DNBI (disease and non-battlefield injury), 6 per cent were on leave, 2 percent were on compassionate leave, 4 percent were WIA, and one per cent were KIA. Some estimates suggested that as many as one in six soldiers succumbed to an illness or non-battlefield injury.

These overall figures masked significant local variations. The 3 Rifles battlegroup deployed to Sangin over 2009-10 suffered thirty fatalities and over 100 wounded – effectively an entire company had been wiped off the battlegroup’s order of battle. The 2 Para rifle companies that served in the Green Zone in the torrid summer of 2008 reckoned that one in three of their number suffered some form of injury or illness at some point in the tour. 1 Royal Anglian in the previous summer had lost one fifth of its strength – 165

men. As in previous wars, the infantry bore the brunt of the casualties: three fifths of all British fatalities were infantrymen. The most dangerous rank to serve in was the lance-corporal and corporal rank band. In proportion to their numbers in the army, junior NCOs suffered more fatalities than any other rank. The war was borne by twenty-something year olds who daily carried the responsibility for the safety of their sections and who frequently paid for this responsibility with their lives. By the mid-point of the war, twenty-seven teenagers had been killed and not a small number were amputees. Kids with barely any other experience of life were repatriated in coffins. Officers, by contrast, survived the war well. The Officer to Other Ranks fatality ratio was less than 1:10. This did not imply that officers shirked danger. It was just not the type of war where officers had to lead from the front (although many did to give encouragement to wearying soldiers). In the Second World War, a bolshie conscript army had to be cajoled and even threatened into taking risk by an officer class that paid a high concomitant price. In Normandy, more than one British Army officer had to point a pistol at his own men to make them obey orders. In Korea, the same problem bedevilled the British war effort, based on pressed and reluctant national servicemen. In Helmand, an all-professional and well-motivated volunteer force did not require this kind of leadership. Just one commanding officer was killed in the war – Lieutenant Colonel Rupert Thorneloe of the Welsh Guards - an event that provoked great media commotion.

The mortality and wounding statistics told the story of a war that reached its crescendo in 2009-10 (at least for the British) and then declined. In 2006, eighty-five soldiers were wounded in action.[713] In the subsequent two years the numbers jumped to 234 and 235. In 2009 there was a leap – 509 soldiers were wounded in action, an unprecedented number outside the recent experience of the British Army. Disease and non-battlefield injury numbers similarly manifested an upward trajectory. In 2006, 156 soldiers fell ill or were injured. In the succeeding three years the numbers were 598, 773 and 721. The consequence of this dolorous spreadsheet of injury and illness was a daily ferrying of casualties to Britain for medical treatment. There were 262 aero-medical evacuations in 2006. By mid-2010 there had been 3,504. As was frequently pointed out, just five British soldiers died in Afghanistan from 2001-05. For the British the war truly started in Helmand Province. This low early fatality rate was probably one of the contributing factors to the wide-eyed optimism with which the British deployed to southern Afghanistan. The WIA:KIA ratio roughly remained at 4:1:although it did improve towards the end of the war. The VSI/SI (Very Seriously Injured/Seriously Injured) to lightly wounded ratio was roughly 1:4:5, although there were variations across tours. The lightly

wounded were returned to front line service in theatre but the constant drain of the lightly wounded was a loss of manpower that commanders could ill afford. For every one soldier lost in combat (killed or wounded), two were being lost through disease and non-battlefield injury. The arithmetic of war has never been reasonable.

The frequency of deployments was inevitably reflected in the regimental fatality league tables. The Rifles 'super regiment' that served almost continuously through the height of the war suffered the most fatalities of all the line regiments (55 KIA/252 VSI). The Royal Marines and Parachute Regiment with their multiple deployments also suffered significant losses – 61/170 and 28/151 respectively. The Guards Division lost 36 men and 246 were very seriously wounded. The Mercians also suffered badly, partly because of multiple deployments but also from the bad luck of serving in the worst corner of Babaji (23/155). The five Scots battalions recorded 20 KIA and 111 VSI, a relatively low bill. Mere frequency of deployment however was not the determining factor and there were exceptions to the rule. By 2010, the Gurkhas had deployed four times to Afghanistan and had suffered just four combat fatalities, manifesting the lowest fatality rate per deployment of any infantry battalion.[714] This remarkable record could not just be attributed to luck or location – smart soldiering must surely have played a role. The Coldstream Guards in the winter of 2007 uniquely saw out their tour in Helmand without suffering a single fatality although their good fortune would run out when they returned to Helmand on their second tour. Again this could not just be attributed to chance – the guardsmen managed their war with intelligence and skill. In 2008, as we have seen in a previous chapter, the canny Royal Irish survived six months in Sangin and almost got away without suffering a single fatality. 3 Para did complete its 2008 tour without suffering a fatality and almost repeated the feat in 2011. Reducing casualty rates was not just about adding more and more layers of armour, and buying more and more expensive equipment– clever soldiering and tactics counted for an awful lot.

All these casualties created a necessarily debilitated home army. Rightly, injured soldiers were not dismissed from service – including the amputees – but were given a chance to rebuild their lives within their regiments, before making the inevitable move to civvy street. Over time, this meant that infantry battalions in particular were carrying a large number of soldiers who could no longer be deployed on operations. Estimates varied, as did categorisations of 'medically fully deployable', but it appears that as many as 20 per cent of combat soldiers either could not be deployed, or only in a limited capacity.[715]

The infantry were not the only arm to suffer high casualty rates: gunners, engineers, signallers, mechanics, logisticians, policemen and two dog handlers added over fifty names to the roll call of the dead. Twenty bomb disposal officers and search engineers (the RESAs and RESTs) lost their lives. A staggering 96 were injured, which included 48 T1 casualties (or amputees). Ten Fijians, eight Nepalese, five South Africans, an Australian, a New Zealander, and one American all died in the service of the Crown. The Commonwealth still answered the call to arms of the mother country, if in fewer numbers and only as volunteers. Twenty-one Territorial Army soldiers gave their lives. Three servicewomen, Captain Lisa Head, Corporal Sarah Bryant, and Corporal Channing Day were killed in action. Three military working dogs, 'Sasha', 'Treo' and 'Theo', were known to have died but the true figure was probably higher as special forces used dogs, and even parachuted with them, World War 2 style. Nine British soldiers were killed by friendly fire, just under half by American aircraft, although in no incident was the American pilot to blame. The British in turn killed two Danish soldiers and at least four ANA soldiers. Despite the obvious psychological and media value of suicide bombing, only sixteen British soldiers were killed in suicide attacks. It always remained the rarest form of attack.

Determining your personal probability of death or injury through reading the runes of these statistics was in the end a fruitless activity. Everybody knew that Sangin was the most dangerous town in Helmand but a tour guarding the dam at Kajaki could probably be seen out with little chance of experiencing harm. Fortune in war seemed to escape both quantification and logic. An anti-personnel mine should result in death or traumatic amputation of both limbs, but at least one soldier (a Gurkha) who stepped on a land mine got away with a broken ankle. Another soldier, Corporal Peter Docherty serving with 27 Transport Regiment, spent a night in the open near FOB Arnhem lying on a camp bed that he unknowingly placed directly over an IED. The following morning he got up, reversed his Land Rover over the spot where he had been sleeping and set the bomb off.

The Vallon man sweeping ahead of a patrol was always judged to be the most dangerous job, with reason, but your position in a patrol was no guarantee of your safety. On more than one occasion several members of a patrol stepped on a concealed IED but failed to set it off before a heavier (or weighed down) soldier at the back of the patrol did set it off. On Operation Herrick 12, a routine patrol in the vicinity of PB Nayiadullah in Lashkar Gah district, set off with twenty-five soldiers in the patrol. The patrol arrived at an improvised footbridge comprising of two logs thrown across the waterway. When the penultimate man in the patrol crossed the footbridge he set off the IED, concealed in the

eastern bank. How could this be explained or rationalized? Twenty-three soldiers had cheated fate. The twenty fourth – a young man barely out his teens - became a triple amputee. The same phenomenon was experienced in vehicle convoys. Your position in a vehicle convoy had no bearing on whether you were likely to strike an IED. Vehicles at the front were the most vulnerable but vehicles in the middle and rear of convoys were all struck by IEDs at different times. The indiscriminate nature of IEDs spared no one. Once the Taliban began sowing IED-fields there was always the possibility that multiple casualties would be caused as soldiers rushed to help injured comrades. Despite the guidance not to approach an injured soldier without first sweeping the ground, many soldiers, responding instinctively to the distress of a friend, did just that and became casualties themselves. Soldiers who did everything right, through sheer bad luck, got caught out. Soldiers who patrolled casually came home unscathed.

Lady luck could be capricious but she could also be kind. Hundreds of patrols were conducted over the course of every six month rotation. On Operation Herrick 11, one such routine patrol set off from PB Wahid in Nad-e Ali District. The patrol comprised of a rifle platoon and a fire support group. After two hours in the Green Zone the soldiers began to receive fire from concealed insurgent positions. While searching for the enemy firing points, one of the patrol members - Lance Corporal Maynard - felt a sudden blow to his head that propelled him two metres in the air and deposited him on his back. To his amazement he had been hit by a bullet that struck two centimetres above his left eye. The helmet he was wearing stopped the bullet, but only by a matter of millimetres. Lance Corporal Maynard's story was not unique. Several soldiers would survive the same near-death encounter with a high velocity round.

In the spring of that same year, Lieutenant David Robertson, a Highlander officer mentoring an ANA company in Musa Qaleh, survived an even more remarkable brush with death. He had been leading a combined patrol mounted on Warrior APCs when they came under fire from Taliban in a tree line. The ANA soldiers dismounted and started advancing on the insurgent positions using the Warriors for cover. As the Warriors crested a small hill near a graveyard they were met by a volley of RPGs. Robertson was commanding his Warrior in the open hatch position – with his head and chest outside the turret. By a considerable fluke, one the RPG warheads spinning through the air struck him in the chest. Robertson recalled: 'I was knocked backwards. I hit the back of the turret pretty hard.' The impact would have been considerable – the equivalent of being hit by a cricket ball travelling at 300 metres per second. He then described what happened:

‘I remember a big bang and a heat wave and then felt burning in my arm and side. I radioed back to report what had happened and then we started to extract some of the ANA casualties who had been injured. One of my lads took a look at my arm which was stinging and felt hot and sore, he whacked a dressing on it and we carried on. We went forward again with the wagon and brought back another ANA casualty and then supported with fire support.’[716]

Robertson had been freakishly lucky. The warhead had glanced off his chest armour, breaking into three parts. The piezo-electric fuze on the nose of the warhead detonated when it struck the empty gunner’s turret. Had it detonated on initial impact Robertson’s upper torso would have been severed. Later in the war, the Commanding Officer of 2 Para would also have a close encounter with an RPG warhead and survive the experience almost unscathed. This was the daily experience of Helmand for the front line soldier – it was a place where the difference between life and death was measured in inches, and courage measured in miles.

CHAPTER 9
THE COMMANDOS RETURN
Operation HERRICK 9
9 October 2008 – April 2009

In the normal course of events a military commander devises a plan and then executes that plan. In 2005, Colonel Gordon Messenger was serving as Chief of Staff at the Joint Force Headquarters. Along with a small team of staff officers Colonel Messenger co-authored the 'Helmand Plan', or plan for the British deployment to Helmand Province. Messenger, however, never saw the plan through. Instead he was posted to the National Defence Academy at Shrivenham, where he attended the Higher Command and Staff Course. From there he was appointed aide-de-camp to Elizabeth II, where he may have cut a slightly incongruous figure with his weathered face and appearance of a retired boxer. It was certainly a world away from his roots in the Royal Marines in which he had served for the last twenty-six years of his life. Like many young men, Messenger had joined up for action and adventure but mostly found a life of routine and run-of-the-mill training. This all changed in 2000 when he deployed with the British task force to Kosovo. At the conclusion of this operation he was appointed OBE. Three years later he found himself in command of 40 Commando landing on the Al Faw Peninsula east of Basra, during the 2003 American-Anglo invasion of Iraq. Iraqi resistance was patchy and even pitiful but at least this was war. A DSO followed. At the conclusion of Operation Telic 1 Messenger was posted to the Joint Force Headquarters, and it was here that his career first intersected with Helmand Province. Now, three years later, he was returning to the province as Commander 3 Commando Brigade. The appointment was doubly unexpected as the brigade commander earmarked to take 3 Commando Brigade to Helmand – Brigadier 'Buster' Howes – fractured his pelvis in an accident one month before the deployment, necessitating the sudden change of command. Surveying the wreckage of a plan he had once drafted what did Messenger make of his appointment and the task ahead of him?

The see-saw of expectations had swung decisively downwards when the marines began

to take over from the paratroopers in the autumn of 2008. The symbolic threshold of 100 fatalities had been passed. His predecessor, Brigadier Carleton-Smith, had no doubt communicated his pessimism over the conduct of the war. The media, with Iraq now shifting from the public consciousness, had swung its attentions to Afghanistan. The whiff of a second fiasco was in the air. Faced with another Afghan winter, Messenger was both realistic and cautious. 'I think good enough is what we should look for,' he told an interviewer before deploying to Afghanistan, adding, 'there is a new realism in the air'. This new realism was certainly evident amongst his political masters. On 3 October, John Hutton took over as the third Secretary of State for Defence in as many years. At the time he was mainly known - at least in the popular press - as the man who confided that the Chancellor Gordon Brown would be 'a fucking disaster' as a Prime Minister. Unusually for a Defence Secretary, Hutton had a personal interest in military affairs and had even written a well-received regimental history based on the experiences of the King's Own Royal Lancasters during the First World War. In the end, he would serve less than a year, resigning suddenly in the summer of 2009, perhaps incapable of working alongside the Scotsman who had ascended inexorably from the Treasury to 10 Downing Street. Nevertheless, in his short tenure Hutton impressed as a competent minister who was long on honest argument and short on spin.

The circumstances of his appointment were poor. The Brown honeymoon was over and the government was being wracked by a periodic leadership challenge. Hutton's immediate priority was not Afghanistan but rather closing the final chapter on Iraq. In the week before he assumed his ministerial post, the troublesome Anbar Province had been handed over to the Iraqi authorities. Wasit and Babil Provinces exchanged hands over the next month. A more pressing concern – and a cause of great embarrassment to the British government – was the expiry of UN Security Council Resolution 1790 on 31 December. Angered by a perceived British surrender in the south, the Iraqi government led by Nouri al Maliki had foot-dragged over negotiations on the legal status of the remaining British forces camped in the airport outside the city. If the negotiations had failed the British would have found themselves in the humiliating position of having to quit the country, effectively expelled rather than thanked for their efforts. In the end, common sense won the day and the last fragment of British sovereignty was handed back to the Iraqis on 1 January 2009, in a carefully choreographed ceremony at Basra International Airport. The relief on Foreign Secretary David Miliband's face was undisguised.

The coincidence of the final hand-over in Iraq with 3 Commando Brigade's second tour of Helmand meant that the machinery of the MOD could now be devoted to a single

theatre of operations. This was noticeable to the soldiers who deployed with the brigade. A gunner officer, Lieutenant Colonel Neil Wilson, wrote approvingly:

'Much has changed since between [sic] last time we were here on Op HERRICK 5 and this time, Op HERRICK 9 – some for the better and some for the worse. Most noticeable is the campaign footing that the Helmand Task Force is now clearly on – no longer fighting from one day to the next, but taking a far more considered and long–term approach.'[717]

He was referring to Operation Entirety, an initiative promoted by General David Richards, now C-in-C Land Forces (it would be formally implemented at the beginning of 2009). A staff officer serving under Richards jokingly warned that he was not important enough to declare war on his own, but this is exactly what he did.[718] And it was also precisely what the army needed. Two years after British forces first entered Helmand, and despite the obvious unravelling of the campaign, Whitehall and PJHQ were still in denial that the euphemistic 'operation' was in fact a full blown war. It was a measure of the lack of accountability of those in senior posts responsible for the prosecution of the war – the operational command chain that stretched from the CDS, through the Chief of Joint Operations (CJO) to the in-theatre brigade commander – that nobody had stepped forward to take charge. What was striking about Operation Entirety was that it was championed by someone *outside* the operational command chain, who essentially butted in and took responsibility for the war. As C-in-C Land, Richards had no operational responsibility for Operation Herrick. His role was to generate the land forces (regiments, battalions, sub-units and so on), which were then 'handed over' to PJHQ every six months to fulfil the rotations. The CJO and PJHQ commanded Operation Herrick, or should have. As Richards later described in his autobiography *Taking Command* the problem of a lack of accountability and responsibility in senior posts had become endemic in an army obsessed with processes and committees and somewhat less zealous on straightforward leadership. Over time, Operation Entirety introduced a raft of measures and equipment that transformed the British war, helped by Richards' ascendency to the posts of CGS and eventually CDS.

Actually, in the short term, Lieutenant Colonel Wilson could not have been more wrong. 3 Commando Brigade deployed to Helmand with no plan except to consolidate the fragile gains made by their predecessors. Messenger – only one month in the job - anticipated no major operations over the winter, the traditional off-season for fighting in Afghanistan. This, incidentally, puts paid to the allegation that British commanders were

deploying to Helmand intent on undertaking ‘signature operations’ to make their name.

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One event changed all this. On the evening of 10 October, two days after the formal hand-over ceremony between the paratroopers and the marines, as many as four reported Taliban columns began marching on the provincial capital from Nad-e Ali. This was highly unusual and had not been witnessed before. The main group appeared to be driving towards Bolan Bridge from the area of Luy Bagh (‘Big Garden’) in Nad-e Ali. Luy Bagh had enjoyed a brief moment of fame in 1987 when one of its sons, a Noorzai named Shah Nazar Khan, had been appointed provincial governor. Since then, it had lapsed back into obscurity. Two other groups appeared to be marching from the north and south. A last group appeared to be gathering in the east. In the ensuing scramble to intercept the Taliban an ANA *kandak* and an Afghan special force detachment were dispatched to block the advance from Nad-e Ali, and Apache helicopters did the rest. The threat had been exaggerated. Kandahar experienced a number of such attacks over the years and they always fizzled out within a day with the insurgents incurring heavy casualties. In this case, perhaps 150 fighters were involved and it appeared that at least a third of these were killed or wounded in what amounted to a nocturnal duck shoot for the Apache crews.

There was speculation that the insurgents had tried to exploit the hand-over; or perhaps that Sher Mohammed Akhundzada had been behind the attack to discredit Governor Mangal; or that inter-tribal rivalry over the government-led eradication program had caused the flare-up (the Noorzai-dominated police had a habit of pushing eradication teams into lands belonging to tribal enemies). Abdul Rahman Jan, the former sacked police chief with significant poppy cultivations in Nad-e Ali may have been complicit. Michael Martin argues that it was an Akhundzada-Jan double act, but this allegation came from the Nad-e Ali Governor Habibullah who might be expected to discredit his enemies.[719] Whatever the truth, the event shook both Mangal and the task force and it completely changed the course of the commando’s tour. There were discussions over moving the PRT to a safe location like Camp Bastion – an indication of just how febrile and exaggerated the atmosphere became in the brigade HQ.[720] This proposal was wisely dismissed. Such a move would have been viewed as a ‘defeat’ of the British, much like the withdrawal from Basra Palace.

In the end, Messenger resolved that the first priority for 3 Commando Brigade would be to secure Nad-e Ali District – the original Afghan Development Zone. It was an index of the lack of campaign direction offered by PJHQ that two years into the war, this became

the adopted plan. By the time 19 Light Brigade arrived in the spring the plan gained coherence with the decision to secure neighbouring Babaji District but the coherence was entirely illusory. There had been no long-term plan – it all stemmed from an abortive and over-ambitious Taliban attempt to march on the capital and Messenger's swift response to the potential crisis. In this respect, Gordon Messenger holds a central place in the British involvement in Helmand, albeit thanks to the strange Taliban attack. It was this Royal Marine's plan that effectively became the British campaign scheme for the remainder of the war.

The second important consequence of the 10 October attack was the creation of a new Battlegroup Centre South, commanded by the Deputy Brigade Commander, Colonel Martin Smith (although finding troops for this battlegroup would prove a challenge throughout the tour). At the time, the only British presence in Nad-e Ali was a beleaguered B Company of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (5 Scots), due to be replaced by J Company of 42 Commando, with reinforcements from 2 Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment (2 PWRR). These soldiers were holed up in an abandoned school, renamed PB Argyll, in Nad-e Ali bazaar. The Argylls at this base illustrated all the problems besetting under-manned British infantry battalions. This company was in fact made up from a hotch-potch of attachments and had no fire support. Nonetheless, the company commander remained determined to push the insurgents away from the abandoned bazaar, and mounted at least one fighting patrol every day for a period of six weeks. In only two of those patrols did the Argylls not end up in a gun battle. The Jocks reckoned they accounted for over 100 enemy dead, a certain overestimation. More importantly, the British toehold in central Nad-e Ali was defended and would later expand to become the major hub of operations.

Lieutenant Colonel Wilson may have been premature in his judgement that the British were now taking a long term approach, but there were visible changes that he could not have helped but notice. Since he last deployed, three more battlegroups had been added to the order of battle and the task force had doubled in size, albeit 'the aviation to support it has not, making helicopter assets even more precious than ever'. Like many soldiers returning to Helmand, Wilson was impressed that the fighting had stopped in the immediate environs of the District Centres. Four British battlegroup headquarters were now based in these former platoon houses which remained 'nascent and austere locations' but at least this was 'a sure sign of progress'. Now Zad remained 'as deserted and war-torn as the day we left', and although a third turbine had been delivered to Kajaki, Wilson was candid enough to concede that 'it will be some time before its benefits are felt across

Helmand'. In fact, they never were.

Some progress appeared to have been made in the governance of the province and in the vexed question of Security Sector Reform, or turning out half-decent policemen. The new governor, Gulabuddin Mangal, impressed everyone with his commitment and drive. Two more police chiefs had been sacked and the hope was that the latest incumbent would follow the good example of the new governor. Notwithstanding these small victories Wilson could not help but observe a factor that was preying on everyone's minds – the 'exponential increase in Improvised Explosive Devices'.

He also noticed that there was 'seemingly just as much poppy in the fields as ever'. Of the 8,200 tonnes of opium produced in Afghanistan in the previous season, UNODC estimated that 58 per cent had been processed within Afghanistan, producing an estimated 666 tonnes of morphine or heroin. As 3 Commando Brigade fanned out across the province, the average dry opium price was hovering around $91 per kilogram. This compared with $2,340 for an equivalent kilogram of heroin. The calculation was easily made: the narcotics traffickers and their associates in the insurgency were making huge profits. Despite a much-publicised Governor's wheat program virtually no progress had been made in counter-narcotics, an embarrassment that NATO finally addressed in a conference of defence ministers held in Budapest in October. At the conclusion of the conference an announcement was made that 'under the existing operational plan, ISAF can act in concert with the Afghans against the facilities and the facilitators supporting the insurgency, in the context of counter-narcotics'. This seemed to give a green light for raids against drug laboratories but there was an urgent need for a comprehensive counter-narcotics strategy and no nation, least of all Britain that was meant to be leading on counter-narcotics, offered such a strategy.

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Budapest's endorsement of NATO's role as an anti-drugs force meant that the British (and ISAF-wide) reticence to deal with counter-narcotics had now been challenged. This represented a significant change to the hands-off policy that guided the commando's first tour of Helmand. The change in direction had been sought by the Afghan government, but had been especially pressed by increasingly exasperated American officials. US Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, and SACEUR, General John Craddock, had insisted on this agenda item at the summit. The UK had no choice but to support the US resolution. Anything less would have felt like disloyalty, and besides, the UK was openly arguing for NATO allies to do more, not less, in Afghanistan. Speaking in London, the US deputy

under-secretary of state for South Asia, Patrick Moon was explicit on this point:

'We shall be focussing on Helmand on combating the drugs trade. We need to break the nexus between the drugs barons and the Taliban who are cultivating opium to fund the insurgency. Helmand is obviously a problem because the scale of opium production there.'[721]

To reinforce his argument he pointed out that when the British arrived in Helmand opium production had accounted for about 25 per cent of the total Afghan production. Two years later (as a result of British failure, he strongly implied) it accounted for 50 per cent, although this was an underestimate.

For the British, Moon's comments were just one more set of barbs in an increasingly acrimonious public dispute over the best way to tackle poppy cultivation. The British position was consistent, pragmatic and based on a reasonable fear that any measures that alienated the farmers would provoke a general rebellion in the province. 'Madam Deputy Speaker', argued Des Browne in the summer of 2006, 'our soldiers are not narcotics police and we do not ask them to be narcotics police. They are not waging a narcotics war; they will not destroy poppy fields and fight farmers for bags of opium – they are helping to create the conditions of security and development in which the narcotics industry will be weakened and eventually driven out by the Afghans themselves'.[722] The sentiment was laudable but British troops *were* embroiled in a narcotics war, whether they admitted it or not.

This stance made eminent sense but offered no better long-term answers than more aggressive American anti-narcotics policies. The British were suggesting no credible alternatives beyond a blind optimism in a vague future. Euphemistic 'conditions of security and development' were not going to eradicate the narcotics industry. This was driven - like any other enterprise -by market forces, not government initiatives. Browne was flat wrong about the nature of the conflict – Britain *was* engaged in a narcotics war. No British government could admit this because it would have muddied the official narrative that British soldiers and marines were dying in Helmand to 'keep Britain safe from terrorism'. The proposition that British servicemen were being killed because the government had become entangled in an unwinnable drugs war in the Pashtun belt of southern Afghanistan was just not sellable. British policy amounted to a raft of ineffective programs, while still contriving to spend large sums of public money on counter-narcotics programs. Although this is jumping ahead in the story, it is apposite to note at this juncture that by 2011, counter-narcotics was in fact quietly dropped from the British agenda in

Helmand. In traditional fashion, no unpleasant questions were posed over how the Blair government's foolish offer to take the lead as counter-narcotics nation in Afghanistan ended in such ignominy.

Regardless of the Anglo-American dispute, tackling the Taliban narco-insurgency began in earnest in the spring of 2009 with immediate if modest results. SACEUR's directive to ISAF on 4 February of that year specifically authorised attacks on narcotics 'facilities' and 'facilitators', if a link could be proven between the former and the insurgency. This last caveat was an irrelevance. The links between the Pashtun insurgency and the opium trade were plain and widely described in the literature of international bodies such as UNODC, as well as in the media. ISAF's coyness over the whole business was always founded on the fear that any suggestion of Western soldiers destroying the livelihoods of thousands of Afghan farmers in the south would profit the Taliban and further erode local support for the international forces. The British were so sensitive about the matter that they refused to authorise bombing of drug laboratories. Flattening buildings with 2,000 pound bombs was not going to be the British way. American forces had no such qualms and they were soon reducing illegal drug bazaars to smoking stacks of ruins. This reinforced a bizarre Helmandi perception, investigated by Michael Martin that the British were in fact covertly supporting the insurgents, and the common enemy of both was the Americans. In theory, both British and American forces were supposed to be working in support of the Afghanistan Special Narcotics Force and Narcotics Interdiction Unit (Task Force 333 in Helmand), but in reality only ISAF had the military muscle to significantly challenge the narcotics infrastructure.

The size of the problem had become huge. UNODC bar charts showed Helmand towering above other provinces in opium production. In 2008, Helmand province had cultivated 103,590 hectares of opium poppy. The next nearest rival was the equally violent neighbouring province of Kandahar with 14,623 hectares. By contrast, all across the north of Afghanistan provinces had become poppy free, although these had never cultivated the opium poppy in large numbers anyway. Government Led Eradication or GLE – a policy avoided by ISAF and weakly supported by the Afghan government - was token and open to local corruption. In the 2009 spring harvest, just 1,383 hectares of opium poppy cultivation were eradicated.[723] It was well known (from satellite studies by institutions such as the University of Cranfield), that eradication claims were commonly exaggerated by as much as a third. The eradication force would simply be bought off by a wealthy landowner after one or two fields had been eradicated to satisfy local honour and the odd

journalist sent to cover the story. It was not unusual for some of the policeman to be smallholders themselves, using the opium poppy to supplement their meagre state incomes. The incentives to eradicate the problem away were simply absent.

The most profitable military strategy was to close the drug laboratories and bazaars. There were dozens of laboratories throughout the Green Zone, some no more than kitchens run by a single household, and some run on an industrial scale. They were exceedingly difficult to hide. Aerial surveillance could readily detect the tell-tale signs of precursor chemicals supplied by the barrel loads. The heat signature of burning furnaces was also difficult to conceal from thermal and multi-spectral sensors.

The key factor in this game of cat and mouse was always intelligence. ISAF had in fact already begun targeting drug laboratories in 2008. In that year, a counter-narcotics operation was being mounted virtually every week and sixty-eight laboratories were reportedly destroyed.[724] The results of these operations, however, had been disappointing. Just over 7,000 kilograms of opium and a similar quantity of dry precursor chemicals had been destroyed. Helmand alone, where 88 per cent of the population was supported the cultivation of the opium poppy, had produced several hundred times this amount in one year.[725] The limited impact of these operations was evident in the lack of response in either the supply or demand of the drug. The 'technicians' rebuilt their laboratories and opium bazaars continued to trade openly in areas supposedly under ISAF control.

Armed with better and targeted intelligence, ISAF counter-narcotics operations in 2009 were more successful. The tempo of operations remained the same but the catches became bigger. By mid-May, opium destruction had exceeded the entire total of the previous year by 600 per cent - just over 40,000kg of opium was burned. There had been an 800 per cent increase in the interception of precursor chemicals – over 60,000kg had been destroyed. As a result of these raids the narcotics industry would adapt, moving to more remote areas and dispersing its laboratories. The other key was security - opium did follow the insurgency. A nationwide survey in 2009 showed that roughly 51 per cent of villages with 'very poor' security were engaged in the cultivation of the opium poppy. This figure fell away to less than 10 per cent in villages with 'very good security'.[726]

Despite these successes the arithmetic of the opium trade remained frustratingly paradoxical. ISAF calculated that counter-narcotics operations in the spring of 2009 had denied the Taliban insurgency as much as $1.6 million of income at farm gate values. Yet in the same period, the US Department of Defense was allocating over $171 million to

counter-narcotics, the largest slice simply being swallowed up by air travel of contractors.[727] ISAF could point to a yearly reduction in total poppy hectares grown in Afghanistan (by 19 per cent in 2008) but this success ultimately threatened to stimulate a rise in the prices of dry and fresh opium, which would in turn increase profits for the insurgency. The single biggest spike in prices had been in 2001, the year after a Taliban imposed ban on the opium poppy almost collapsed cultivation overnight. Farm gate prices for a kilogram of dry opium jumped from a modest $28 to a meteoric $301 - a 900 per cent increase which was largely sustained for the next two years. This bonanza for opium dealers equally dramatically collapsed as poppy cultivation resumed in the succeeding two years. By the time the British arrived in Helmand farm gate prices hovered around a healthy $94 but were on a slow decline. Even without ISAF the market was correcting itself. Counter-narcotics operations – whether or not policy planners in Kabul admitted it – were another mechanism assisting this market correction. The ultimate beneficiaries were, as in previous years, the insurgents.

3 Commando Brigade deployed with two of its commandos – 42 and 45 Commando. The latter mustered five companies but was actually over 200 men short of the manpower generated by 2 Para battlegroup which it replaced, because of the withdrawal of an American unit and other commitments.[728] Whiskey Company initially deployed to FOB Jackson in Sangin; Yankee Company relieved FOB Inkerman; X-Ray Company eventually moved into the newly-built FOB Nolay after FOB Robinson was abandoned; Zulu Company deployed north of Gereshk in FOB Gibraltar; and Victor Company guarded Kajaki Dam. In the case of 42 Commando, the unit was just over half strength (436 marines, rather than 800) due to a government financial cap, and it deployed as the theatre reserve in Kandahar.[729] In addition to the Royal Marine commandos, the brigade was now supported by two army battalions and several sub-units. 1 Rifles under Lieutenant Joe Cavanagh was deployed to Sangin, the first of a succession of deployments of this regiment to the hostile town that would cost the Rifles so much blood. Of the four companies in this regiment, only E Company, however, was deployed to the District Centre. With an expanded geographical presence inherited from 16 Air Assault Brigade, B Company was detached to the Queen’s Dragoon Guards (QDG) Battlegroup in Garmsir, in the south; and A and Support Companies along with other elements were deployed to Nad-e Ali District, the new area of interest for the British. A Company was subsequently redeployed as an OMLT to Musa Qaleh, working under the 2 Royal Gurkha Rifles (2 RGR) Battlegroup, sharing facilities with a US Marine Corps sub-unit that was engaged in

mentoring the ANP. At the mid-point in the tour Support Company would swap with A Company that would re-deploy to Camp Shorabak.

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2 RGR under Lieutenant Colonel Chris Darby was deployed to the Battlegroup (North-West) area of operations encompassing principally Musa Qaleh, but also Now Zad. The battlegroup was an eclectic mix of sub-units and nationalities all commanded by the battlegroup HQ based at the Musa Qaleh District Centre. In addition to B Company and the Gurkha reconnaissance group, the battlegroup was reinforced by a Warrior Company Group from 1 Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment (1 PWRR), and a Mastiff Squadron crewed by the Queen's Dragoon Guards (QDG). Artillery support was provided by 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery. Engineer tasks, of which there would be several as the Gurkhas expanded the security cordon in Musa Qaleh, fell to 77 Squadron Royal Engineers. Musa Qaleh also hosted an entire ANA *kandak* as well as the company of ANP mentored by US marines.

The remainder of 2 RGR were dispersed throughout Helmand. One company provided police mentoring in Lashkar Gah; a second supported the QDG Battlegroup (South); one platoon provided force protection for the Combat Logistic Patrols (CLPs); and a second platoon reinforced the Danish battlegroup in Nahr-e Saraj. This wide dispersion of soldiers from a single battalion was not unusual – indeed very few commanding officers in Helmand ever enjoyed the privilege of commanding their battalions as a single unit. Most faced the inevitable break-up of their battalions into penny-packet company and platoon groups. This dispersion of forces inevitably carried a massive logistic bill: just two months into the tour, the brigade logistic regiment was forced to mount eleven Combat Logistic Patrols (CLPs). These were significant undertakings. A typical CLP comprised of over 200 trucks and escorts and took 45 minutes to overtake. Each aimed to deliver around 3,000 tons of supplies including 680,000 litres of fuel to the matrix of FOBs and patrol bases.[730] On many levels, the biggest single endeavour of the British task force had simply become administering and feeding itself.

When Lieutenant Colonel Darby surveyed his new domain in Musa Qaleh, he found many reasons for dissatisfaction. The area of operations inherited by Battlegroup (North-West) was 'not secure'.[731] To the north of the District Centre there was 'an obvious gap in the Patrol base ring'. This meant that there was 'an enduring direct fire threat to the DC; significant intimidation of Local Nationals in the Green Zone and Desert Compounds; and a durable and evolving IED threat'. To the south he faced a more 'traditional' front line,

with a ‘strong defensive belt’ that had been established only half an hour’s walk away from the centre of the town. This front line included ‘bunkers and trench systems supported by IED concentrations and long-range heavy automatic weapon fire’. To consolidate the security bubble around Musa Qaleh, 2 RGR would have to expand that bubble north and south, forcing the Alizai insurgents further away from the town. Lieutenant Colonel Darby had insufficient forces to conduct a simultaneous operation on both sides of the town so the decision was taken to conduct two separate and sequential operations, known as Operations Mar Nonu 1 and 2.

Darby’s operational concerns were not the only problems that would beset the 2 RGR company at Musa Qaleh. Just living healthily at the District Centre presented a challenge. By the end of the six months, the Gurkhas calculated that they had spent 90 per cent of the tour living off rations. The British had still not found a way to get fresh food to one of their major flagship bases.

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The aim of the first operation - Mar Nonu 1 - was to push back the insurgents a further three kilometres south of Musa Qaleh, an area from which they were routinely attacking the patrol bases ringing the town. ‘Route Pink’, the main track leading south out of Musa Qaleh, which was heavily seeded with IEDs, would be cleared, as well as about fifty compounds, some of which were abandoned and known to harbour insurgents. The operation would be concluded with the construction of a further patrol base (which was subsequently named after Rifleman Yubraj Rai who was killed in the operation). If the plan unfolded successfully, the Gurkhas would link up with the isolated US PB, a two-storey modern compound held by American special forces in the middle of insurgent territory.

The operation was undertaken in the first week of November, led by B Company under Major Ross Daines. To achieve surprise the company undertook a five hour tactical march in darkness to reach the lines of departure on the east-west wadi that defines the southern edge of Musa Qaleh. Weighed down like pack mules with ammunition, the Gurkhas arrived at their battle positions damp with sweat despite the night chill. As daylight broke they could see the lines of compounds ahead of them, across perilously open corn fields broken by irrigation ditches. Even these fit mountain men were going to struggle to make good speed across this ground. To provide fire support for the infantrymen, a QDG squadron of Mastiffs had been manoeuvred to the north-west of the B Company line of departure. Following on behind was an ANA *kandak*, mentored by a 1 Rifles OMLT

whose role would be to secure and search the compounds seized by the Gurkhas. The reserve, which would strike at depth positions, was provided by a Warrior Company crewed by soldiers from B Company, 1 PWRR. At H-Hour the three platoons in B Company rose from their concealed positions and began the advance. Whether as a result of achieving surprise, or because the Taliban were gauging the British strength, very little resistance was experienced and B Company reached its first phase line intact.

The lull proved deceptive. Second Lieutenant ‘Oli’ Cochrane was re-organising his platoon in preparation for an advance to the second phase line when the soldiers came under accurate fire from a series of compounds to their west. In the confusion Rifleman Rai was hit by small arms fire and fell mortally wounded. To make matters worse, Cochrane had also been hit but the rounds had been stopped by his radio, rendering it inoperable. The nearest soldier to Rai was Rifleman Dhan Gurung who immediately went to his aid and frantically started trying to save his life, despite being under fire himself. Seeing that the casualty needed urgent evacuation Lance Corporal Gajendra, closely followed by Rifleman Manju, sprinted 100 metres across the bullet-swept field to reach the stricken Yubraj. It was a scenario that would be played countless times in Helmand as soldiers ignored personal safety in a bid to save the life of a comrade. With Rifleman Gurung providing covering fire, the three men struggled to carry Yubraj into dead ground – not an easy task as the weight of a fully laden rifleman could easily exceed fifteen stones. Their efforts were in vain. The round had missed the body armour and the wound was not survivable. The fallen Rai had a typical Gurkha background; he had been the main bread winner of the family supporting a mother, sister and three brothers on his rifleman’s salary.

For the next six hours B Company found itself locked in fierce gun fights with insurgents fighting from concealed and prepared positions. Each compound had to be cleared individually and each carried the risk of an ambush or IED. With ammunition running low and with the gunmen giving little sign that they were yielding to the pressure, artillery fire was called on the suspected enemy positions, which was provided by 29 Commando Regiment. Apache helicopters were also tasked to snipe at insurgents careless enough to expose themselves to aerial observation.

By the late afternoon it was clear that the reserve had to be committed. Using ‘Route Pink’ as an axis of advance, the Warrior Company joined the fray. The Taliban were normally wary of any armoured personnel carriers which they dubbed ‘tanks’, but in this case they stood their ground, perhaps confident that the combination of the difficult

ground and threat of IEDs would keep the Warriors at bay. The soldiers from B Company 1 PWRR cleared ten compounds, a task that took all night and was only finally completed at dawn on the following day. Weapons, drugs and IEDs were all discovered in the now deserted compounds. Like a wartime scene, the Gurkhas were warmly greeted the following morning by American soldiers who had stuck it out in US PB despite their isolated position.

In the Commanding Officer's words:

'The first MAR NONU operation sought to redefine a well established defensive line on our terms. The battle was fought over open farm land interspersed with groups of compounds and the insurgents had established defensive mine fields in support of well prepared defensive positions. These positions were linked to each other and to the rear by communications trenches, rat runs and kariz lines [underground aquifers], and the primary Command and Control location lay some 2km to the south and west across a wadi and well out of direct fire range. This complex terrain was further complicated by the presence of standing corn that provided cover from view and which we could not easily remove for fear of alienating those farmers that did remain.'[732]

By a mixture of careful planning and determined execution Operation Mar Nonu 1 succeeded in pushing back the Taliban front line a further three kilometres, a significant advance in a war where advances were commonly measured in field lengths.

Following the success of Operation Mar Nonu 1, the battlegroup launched the second in the series of operations to the north of Musa Qaleh. Unlike the ground south of the town, this was an area of close country channelled by the Musa Qaleh wadi to the west and the desert to the east. As Lieutenant Colonel Danby described it:

'The land in between is a patchwork of small fields, tree lined irrigation ditches and deep canals running north-south. Here and there large groves of trees make observation difficult, and the presence of pomegranate orchards, overgrown compounds and an area of marijuana laced jungle on the fringes of the wadi increases the complexity of this terrain.'[733]

As in the south, the Taliban had prepared their positions with trenches, bunkers and rat runs. There was no patrol base north of the town which meant that 'the insurgents had sewn the area with IEDs throughout the summer and used the gaps as ambush locations to hit the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and 5 SCOTS'. The urban and Green Zone fringes had become equally dangerous and the area was seldom patrolled in anything

less than company sized groups as a result. The initiative was held by the insurgents and the government was unable to operate in the area.[734] About four and half kilometres to the north lay the village of Kats Sharbat which the Taliban completely dominated and were using as a command centre.

The tactical problem of annexing this swathe of ground north of Musa Qaleh was compounded by political and logistic problems. Mullah Salaam, Musa Qaleh's weak governor, was unhappy with the prospect of more fighting and was quite content with the status quo. Like many Afghans he viewed accommodation with your enemy as the preferred option if that enemy was not challenging your vital interests – in this case, the narcotics trade. As everyone was benefiting from the illicit trade, with the British holding the ring in the middle, he could see no reason why this happy state of affairs should be disturbed by a resumption of fighting. The second problem facing Danby was that he simply did not have enough troops to mount the operation and then hold the ground. B Company, 1 PWRR was now holding the ground captured on Operation Mar Nonu 1 which meant that the battlegroup no longer had a reserve. Holding the ground – by building a new patrol base in the middle of previously-held enemy territory – was vital to the success of the operation. Operation Mar Nonu 2 would only succeed if he could persuade the ANA to provide the soldiers to man the new base, which the Afghans were reluctant to do.

In Helmand the only way to make progress was to hold shuras. Displaying great patience and not a little determination Danby managed to persuade his hosts over a series of meetings that the current position was unacceptable. Ten days after the conclusion of the first Mar Nonu, the Gurkhas prepared themselves for a push north.

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The plan for Operation Mar Nonu 2 was significantly different to the first operation. In the past, the British Army had been criticised for failing to learn lessons or adapt its tactics. In fact, at the lower levels of command this was not the case. As in Normandy, where revisionist histories have argued that the British actually showed more alacrity and flexibility than their German opponents, commanding officers in Helmand were very quick to digest their experiences and to re-cycle these for subsequent operations. In this case, it was decided that rather than advancing frontally against the Taliban front line, the key would be to unhinge the insurgent positions by threatening their rear. The Taliban stronghold in the village of Kar Sharbat provided the perfect target for this ruse. Operation Mar Nonu 2, unlike its predecessor, would unfold in two phases. In the first phase a large

armoured force would sweep north, bypassing the front line and threaten Kar Sharbat. This deception force would be supported by artillery, Apache and ground attack aircraft, hopefully reinforcing in the insurgents' minds that a full scale assault was about to be launched against the village. A USMC company would make a parallel approach on the right flank, suggesting a possible pincer movement. With Taliban attention drawn north, B Company 2 RGR would sweep from the south with an ANA company and seize a large compound, known as Compound 260, which had been selected as the future patrol base. Support Company, also supported by an ANA company, would secure the village of Sharawuz, on the important 'Route Black', a task which they accomplished with no opposition. An important by-product of this plan was that it would almost certainly generate 'chatter' on the Taliban radio nets and allow the Gurkhas to identify command nodes.

The operation started with the deployment before dusk of the battlegroup tactical headquarters to the Roshan Tower overlooking the Green Zone north of the town. From this eyrie, Lieutenant Colonel Danby would be able to watch the battle unfold as well as co-ordinate fire support more effectively. Simultaneously, the Gurkha reconnaissance platoon mounted in Jackals married up with a half squadron of Mastiffs crewed by C Squadron QDG at an observation post called Himal, to the west of the town. This group would act as the deception force. At day break the following morning the deception force advanced north-west along the Farhad Mandah, the major wadi west of the town. This was the same wadi that had been used by the paratroopers of Task Force 1 Fury in the re-taking of Musa Qaleh in the previous winter.

After about one kilometre the party began to follow a tributary wadi, the narrower Wuch Mandah that led north to Kats Sharbat. As the vehicles came level with the village – in dead ground – they swung east to climb the high ground that overlooked the village where they immediately encountered problems. The 30 ton Mastiffs were unable to negotiate the gradient of the slope imperilling the entire deception ploy. After a quick conference it was decided to split the force. C Squadron QDG continued north for a further 800 metres to a point where the ridge became less severe and the Gurkhas retired south to a cutting which allowed better access onto the higher ground. As they crested the hill they discovered former Russian vehicle scrapes which they occupied, notwithstanding that Russian positions were frequently booby-trapped with mines.

As the deception group struggled up the rocky ridgeline overlooking Kat Sharbat, B Company set off under a waning moon towards the Taliban frontline. A significant amount of intelligence had been collated identifying likely concentrations of IEDs and ambush

positions. These were all avoided. At night, ground sign that gave away a dug-in IED could not be seen, making the work of the Vallon men even more dangerous. The best option was to avoid any such areas altogether which the Gurkhas did by infiltrating stealthily on less well-used paths. In fact, the IED belt was not as dense as the Gurkhas feared and the majority of IEDs were concentrated on the approach tracks to a village called Towghi Keli, another settlement with an anti-ISAF history where the new PB Woqab would be built. The progress of B Company was observed by a pair of US Navy F-18s and by a Hermes 450 UAV flying at lower level. There was no Taliban sentry line – a serious mistake on the part of the insurgents – allowing the Gurkhas to make good progress undetected.

Further to the north, the crested vehicles of the deception group had their anticipated effect. Shortly after dawn ICOM intercepts revealed that the Taliban had spotted the British vehicles and that preparations were underway for a fight. This was confirmed by a mass exodus of women and children who headed west into the safety of the Green Zone. The British soldiers were amazed to see what appeared to be hundreds of civilians, as if taking part in a rehearsal, seemingly appear out of nowhere and then disappear again all in a matter of fifteen minutes. Very probably this was a rehearsed response by a civilian population that had suffered the experience of Russian vehicles overlooking the village from the very same positions that the British now occupied. When it was judged that all the civilians had cleared the area, a large smoke and illumination barrage was ordered across the western edge of Kats Sharbat. The exploding shells caused no damage but the smoke and incandescent flares falling on the ends of parachutes served to increase the confusion in the insurgents' minds. To reinforce the sense that the British were about to assault, several vehicles in the deception group made feinting movements, raising dust and making a lot of noise.

Almost three hours after daybreak, in Lieutenant Colonel Danby's words:

'B Coy 2 RGR had cleared up to its line of departure and without pause rolled through picking up an Afghan National Army company on its eastern flank. Together these sub-units pushed north through the fields, streams and desert compounds of the northern MSQ [Musa Qaleh] Wadi] while around them nothing moved. There were no civilians in the fields, no children in the streets and no animals released to pasture. This continued throughout the day; an interesting development for an area that until the day before had either been subject to predictable civilian activity, or a significant number of large-scale small arms attacks.'

Objective Saints, the first key feature in the vicinity of a village called Takht-e Pol Keli, was reached without incident. A small party remained behind to secure this area while the remainder of B Company continued to press north. In the meantime a convoy of engineer vehicles carrying stores and specialist search and counter-IED teams proceeded up the Musa Qaleh wadi to rendezvous with the holding force at Objective Saints.

Then the Gurkhas got a lucky break. The deception group had been ordered to fire speculatively over the village into a set of deserted compounds which lay on a hillside east of Kats Sharbat. Far from being deserted, the EW team intercepting Taliban communications realised that one compound was being used by the local insurgent commander. In much the same way that Lieutenant Colonel Danby had positioned himself on high ground to overlook the battlefield, so his counterpart had followed the same thought. As equally likely, the Taliban local commander had simply slipped away from danger leaving behind his foot soldiers. This tendency to run away was not uncommon and never ceased to surprise the British who wondered why the Taliban rank and file followed commanders who were not prepared to share the risks of their men.

This intelligence was passed back to the deception group who used their thermal sights to scan the suspect compound. The suspicions of the EW team proved correct – the Taliban commander could be clearly seen with his radio hiding behind the compound gate. A Javelin shoot was then ordered with mixed results. One missile struck the wrong compound; the second seemed to impact above the compound; and the third missile, fired in top attack mode, lost its lock-on and missed altogether. At least the Gurkhas were able to confirm that they had the right target as further intercepted communications revealed that the insurgent commander had been spooked by the volley of missiles and had taken cover. An F-18 was then lined up to destroy the compound with a 500 pound bomb, a decision that was reversed after it was (wisely) decided that the commander was more valuable alive than dead. For the rest of the day the voluble Taliban commander who had been so close to death continued to chatter on his radio, allowing the EW team to build up a detailed picture of all the subordinate call signs under his command.

In the south, by mid-afternoon, B Company had seized the compound that would be used as the new patrol base. Not a single shot had been fired vindicating the deception plan and infiltration. Royal Engineer search teams found a massive 40 kilogram IED buried under the floor of the main building in the compound and two further devices in the immediate vicinity. When the large IED was finally detonated at sunset; ‘there was an ear splitting roar and a blinding flash followed immediately by a star burst of light as the seat

of the explosion was spread over several hundred metres'.[735] Observers at the Roshan Tower noted that 'the resultant fire burned all night'. The entire operation had met very little resistance. Desultory fire wounded one ANA soldier in the stomach who had been standing on a rooftop but there were no Gurkha casualties. As the deception group withdrew south it bumped insurgents moving west across the Green Zone in pick-up trucks. The vehicles were an easy target for the heavy machine guns mounted on the Jackals and the Taliban were scattered. Over the next day, sappers set to work on building the patrol base and twenty-four hours later PB Woqab was ready for occupation – an important consideration as within forty-eight hours the new base began to receive incoming fire. For the rest of the month the new base was attacked every day.

For 2 RGR, Operation Mar Nonu 2 had been 'a complete success'. Crucially, Lieutenant Colonel Danby had made both his land grabs at the beginning of the battlegroup's six month deployment. This meant that the Gurkhas could now switch their efforts to consolidating their gains, winning the trust of the locals that now fell within the enlarged security bubble, and interdicting insurgents attempting to penetrate the cordon. This cordon was further reinforced at the end of the tour, in March, by 8 (Alma) Commando Battery that set up a 105mm Light Gun at the Roshan Tower. This proved to be a logistic feat as the only route to the top of the escarpment on which the tower was built was a 400 metre gravel track that was too steep for almost all military vehicles. Twelve tons of stores were pre-positioned by helicopter and a relay was established using two quad bikes and a single Supacat to shift the gun loads to the top of the hill. Within days of surveying this gun in – nicknamed 'the Dragon' – it was in action firing in the direct fire role against insurgent gangs threatening Gurkha patrols. The surprise was considerable.

The commanding officer of 2 RGR judged the consolidation of the security bubble around Musa Qaleh fundamental to calming the situation in the town. The Gurkhas would only suffer one more fatality in their entire tour – a Colour Sergeant Krishnabahadur Dura, killed when the Warrior he was commanding struck an IED. The driver of the vehicle became a double amputee and a female gunner officer riding in the back of the vehicle also suffered an amputation (the Gurkha – Kushal Limbu – would later make the news as the first double amputee to learn how to ride a specially converted 800cc Suzuki bike, apparently to his wife's displeasure).[736] Over the course of the six month tour, 2 RGR was attacked 206 times but crucially all the attacks were against the perimeter of the cordon.[737] There were no attacks at all against the District Centre (although there was a

successful suicide attack against the deputy police chief, possibly orchestrated by the police chief himself to get rid of the troublesome rival). The goal of creating a secure development zone appeared at last to have been achieved - at least in Musa Qaleh.

This success seems to have come about from a combination of factors: the astute placement of patrol bases to create an interlinked security ring around the town; the empathetic nature of the Gurkha soldiers who seemed to excel at counter-insurgency in Helmand; and a genuine disapproval of the Taliban amongst the town elders. When the Taliban retook Musa Qaleh in 2007 the elders had been displaced from power, a pattern that had been repeated throughout Afghanistan over the last two decades as traditional hierarchies dissolved in the face of general lawlessness and warlordism. Whereas in 2006 the elders had viewed the arrival of the British with some suspicion and then despair, they now saw the foreigners as allies against the far worse threat of freebooting drug barons, assorted criminals and gun-toting Taliban. This switch of allegiance was the very trick the British were trying to pull off everywhere in Helmand. That it happened in Musa Qaleh in the winter of 2008 must be credited to the intelligent leadership displayed by Lieutenant Colonel Danby, and to the patient soldiering of his men. But it was also a success borne from continuity of purpose. The foundations had been laid by Brigadier Mackay in the previous winter. These foundations had been cemented by the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (5 Scots) during the summer, and the edifice had finally been completed by the Gurkhas.

Ironically, a factor that allowed the Gurkhas to forge ahead was the absence of the Karzai-appointed governor, Mullah Salaam. The nearly useless governor absconded in November and did not re-appear until the spring (he fled with some justification as the all-powerful police chief Koka, who detested him, had placed a contract on his life with the Taliban). In his absence an acceptable system of local governance was established based on Afghan traditions; the school was re-opened; and adult literacy programs were started. The stalled reconstruction program was kick-started back to life and a massive effort was undertaken through a variety of media to constantly explain ISAF’s presence and the purpose of local initiatives.

This was the upbeat picture that 2 RGR would present of their tour but it could not hide some less palatable facts. Local acceptance of the British was fragile and based on an understanding – never stated but always implicit - that the foreigners would not interfere with the poppy crop or raid drug laboratories. The Gurkhas never did. In effect, the British in Musa Qaleh acted as a guarantor of the peace for all the vested interests in the narcotics

trade. And just beyond the weapon ranges of the ring of patrol bases was an entrenched enemy. 2 Royal Regiment of Fusiliers (2 RRF) would take over from the Gurkhas and suffer seven fatalities with many more seriously wounded. Musa Qaleh town was secured but Musa Qaleh District remained at war.

1 Rifles, the second infantry battlegroup in 3 Commando Brigade experienced a much less focused tour compared to the Gurkhas in the north. Led by Lieutenant Colonel Joe Cavanagh but without the responsibility for a discreet geographical area the battlegroup was frequently used to make up numbers for other unit's operations. Many of these operations were piecemeal and anti-climactic.

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A task conducted by Support Company in the last week of October was typical of such missions. Attached to an American-led operation involving an ANA *kandak*, the company was tasked to clear the left flank of a sweep through Nawa District south of Lashkar Gah. Support Company met up with their ANA counterparts at the ruins of Kala Bost fort, the impressive if neglected 1,000 year old archeological site dating to the Ghaznavid period. Kala Bost had been the Camp Bastion of its day, drawing traders and encouraging the growth of a flourishing bazaar. The riflemen took the rare opportunity to investigate dozens of ancient chambers and tunnels dug into the hillside but, as one soldier remembered, 'unfortunately we did not have time to explore them all'.[738] The operation was nominally commanded by Brigadier Mohayadin, the ANA brigade commander, who took up his post, like a latter-day sultan, in the ruins of the fort. Support Company forded the Helmand River and began a day-long advance through the Green Zone of Nawa. They met resistance on three occasions, and each resulted in a gun battle with locals that barely lasted fifteen minutes. By the evening the company was leaguered in an abandoned school house. The biggest talking point was one fortunate officer – a Captain Chris 'Pav' Pawlowski – who conspired to pass the entire operation in the back of an American Humvee, where he was plied with Gatorade drinks and Hershey bars. It had all the echoes of Tommies exploiting the courteous generosity of American GIs. It was not such an easy ride for the sister C Company that suffered a fatality when Lance Corporal Stephen Kingscott, affectionately known to his mates as 'Schnoz', was killed by gun fire. The popular rifleman was just twenty-two.

In early December the riflemen were deployed again to clear insurgents from an insurgent enclave near Lashkar Gah, and in the beginning of February they took part in Operation Attal ('Hero'), a mission that was ostensibly planned and commanded by the

ANA brigade commander. The aim of the operation was to build a police checkpoint at a canal crossing point near the hostile Barakzai village of Spin Masjid, just five kilometres south of FOB Price.[739] Such was the level of hostility a large number of troops were needed just to undertake this straightforward task. In total, a 700 strong force deployed from FOB Price in a 100 vehicle convoy. This included Leopard tanks provided by the Danish Jutland Dragoons Regiment, ANA companies drawn from the 1st and 3rd brigades of 205 Corps, and 1 Rifles mentors. Sappers from 59 Commando were required to build the checkpoint and artillery support was provided by 29 Commando Regiment. The manner in which the British hailed this operation as proof that the ANA had gained operational credibility was disingenuous. The British would frequently make such claims even as they conceded privately that the ANA could not stand on its feet without significant assistance from ISAF.

The combined ANA-ISAF battlegroup rolled out of FOB Price on 11 February and decamped opposite the crossing point on the Nahr-e Bughra canal, meeting little resistance but encountering seven roadside bombs. General Mohayadin had previously held a shura with the locals to advertise and explain the operation which provided the Taliban with sufficient pre-warning of the impending mission. Over the next seven days, as the ANA pushed further south into the village itself, they encountered more resistance and a further fifteen IEDs – all cleared by British bomb disposal teams. The weather was miserable and overcast and completing the checkpoint was not helped when the single heavy digger, driven by a mentored ANA engineer, ran over an IED and was irreparably damaged. Locals displaced by the fighting were provided with food and blankets, personally distributed by General Mohayadin. This gesture of good will was meant to win hearts and minds but it failed to buy the loyalty of Spin Masjid beyond the duration of the operation. Six months later a Light Dragoons battlegroup would find itself having to retake Spin Masjid which had once again fallen under insurgent control. The British claim – post Operation Attal - that ‘the police are now in control of the once lawless area’ proved premature and false.[740]

These disparate operations inevitably caused attrition in the ranks of 1 Rifles. In the week before Christmas, a twenty-one year old Australian named Stuart Nash, who had only served in the British Army for nine months, was shot and killed. The New Year then started badly for the battlegroup with the death of Serjeant[741] Chris Reed, killed on New Year’s Day. Reed was a Territorial Army soldier who worked in a firm building luxury yachts in Plymouth. He had already completed a tour with the regiment in Iraq and this

was his second operational tour. On the day he left for Afghanistan he became engaged to his fiancé, a local girl called Heather. The amount of mail (‘blueys’, from the colour of the paper) that passed between the couple amazed his fellow riflemen. The last set never reached Garmsir where he was based and would remain unread. Two more NCOs were subsequently killed that month, one in Sangin and a second in Musa Qaleh. Then on 25 February a convoy travelling near Gereshk struck a large IED. Three riflemen died. One of the soldiers, Lance Corporal Paul Upton, had left the army several years previously and had only re-enlisted just in time to join the battalion on its tour of Helmand.

3 Commando Brigade, as we have seen, deployed with two of its commandos: 45 Commando led by Lieutenant Colonel Jim Morris and 42 Commando led by Lieutenant Colonel Charlie Strickland. The two units had quite different tours. The former was committed to the static, defensive holding role in Battlegroup (North-West), and the latter was deployed as the mobile reserve for Regional Command (South-West). The difference between the two tasks was stark. Charlie Strickland would enthuse about his war in a manner which Jim Morris could not share. Where 42 Commando found itself undertaking classic Royal Marine operations, 45 Commando became mired in the slog of attrition warfare in the Green Zone. Over the course of their difficult tour there was a 94 per cent increase in the number of IED finds in Sangin, and the number of gun fights shot up by a fifth.[742] Some 131 devices were found and Whiskey Company suffered thirty-six IED strikes. Sangin’s awful reputation was becoming well-established.

The marines had started tentatively and it was not until the second week of November that they experienced their first fatalities when a vehicle from the Brigade Reconnaissance Force ran over an IED, killing two experienced crewmen, Marines Neil Dunstan and Robert McKibben. The third marine in the vehicle was severely injured. The Royal Marines commonly liked to think of themselves as ‘thinking soldiers’. These two men certainly offered an example of this rule: both were university graduates, which would have been highly unusual in an army unit. McKibben, from County Mayo, had followed in the footsteps of tens of thousands of Irishmen in the service of the British Crown.

The vehicle in which they had been traveling – the Jackal – was originally procured by 22 SAS as a replacement for the Land Rover which struggled to cope with the increased equipment weights carried on operations. It then migrated from Hereford to the wider army when the utility of this vehicle for reconnaissance became evident. The design inspiration for the Jackal came from Val Dare-Bryan who had worked on the classic Lotus 18. The two crew members were placed inside a lightweight frame with the engine behind

them. All that was missing was the racing green livery. The open-top Jackal was popular - robust, with good visibility and capable of negotiating difficult terrain. It suffered, however, from an unanticipated fatal design flaw. Both commander and driver sat directly over the front wheel arches, the most vulnerable points if a vehicle ran over an IED. Despite the V-shaped bottom only so much blast could be deflected. An impressive amount of science was thrown at the problem and significant improvements were made, in particular to the two front seats, to mitigate the effects of a high explosive detonation. Lives were saved by these improvements but the vehicle remained vulnerable. The only design that protected the occupants of a vehicle from the effects of an IED was the standard American design that placed the engine block and wheel arches well forward of the two front crewmen. Jackal had been designed for stealthy special force operations, not security operations in Helmand's IED-infested Green Zone. The number of soldiers and marines killed and injured in this vehicle would exceed the casualty rates suffered in the much-criticized Land Rover Snatch, but somehow the media, fixated by the festering Snatch story, missed the sequel. The father of one of the victims did not miss this pattern. Under a Freedom of Information Act request, the bereaved father collated data on Jackal fatalities and conclusively demonstrated its vulnerability. This protest fell flat, as much as anything, it appeared, because Jackal was the only British designed and built vehicle in the fleet. Constituency jobs in southern England seemed to carry some weight when determining the worth of vehicles. Indeed the Jackal would be migrated into the post-Helmand army, despite its obvious vulnerabilities.

This setback and three more fatalities suffered in November were eclipsed by an event in Sangin which angered the brigade. On 12 November a Quick Reaction Force from X-Ray Company set out from the Sangin District Centre in support of an ongoing operation. As the small force paused on Route 611, south of the District Centre, a thirteen year old boy pushing a barrow approached the marines. Seconds later the barrow detonated killing the boy along with Sergeant John Manuel, Corporal Marc Birch and Marine Damian Davies. Davies left behind a young family and unborn child. Birch, his friend, had the unusual distinction of being the only marine to have scored a goal against an international football team – in his case, the Sierre Leone national squad. The suicide attack that left three commandos dead caused great shock on a day when the brigade had already suffered a fatality after another Jackal drove over an IED killing the commander, Lance Corporal Steven Fellows. It seemed particularly base that the Taliban should be using a young boy as the vehicle for a suicide attack. The ploy was not entirely new as the exploitation of the vulnerable to act as suicide bombers was a long-favoured tactic of cynical Taliban

commanders. Culturally, Afghans balked at suicide bombing. The suicide bombers were coming from that great cesspool of Afghan refugees that had been influenced by radical madrassas in Pakistan. Some were orphans. Some were so poor their families were offered money if their son volunteered as a suicide bomber. Some were drugged. All were completely brain-washed. A Western television crew permitted to interview two failed suicide bombers in Kabul found two sheepish, illiterate teenagers with the mentalities of ten years olds.

Despite this second setback, the pace of operations continued without interruption. Five more marines and soldiers were killed before the end of the year including one poignantly killed on Christmas Eve and a second killed on New Year's Eve.

The key to these mostly successful operations was intelligence. When the latter was sound, the former yielded rewards. Typical of such operations was Operation Ghartse Palang conducted in freezing, wet conditions in the third week of January. The target in this instance was a set of compounds in the village of Mazak, just two kilometres north of FOB Inkerman, near the banks of the Helmand River. This area was a well-known insurgent stronghold and intelligence suggested that the compounds were being used as IED factories and weapon caches. In the summer of 2007, 1 Royal Anglian had been involved in constant and fruitless spats with the villagers in Mazak. Eighteen months on, the marines were going to have another crack.

Yankee Company of 45 Commando was tasked with raiding the compounds, supported by 4 Troop from X-Ray Company and a platoon of ANA. To achieve surprise the marines opted for a covert night infiltration, a risky option because of the threat of IEDs. The gamble paid off and Yankee Company uncovered several unguarded weapon caches before daybreak and the inevitable Taliban reaction. Major Richard Parvin who commanded the raiding force recalled:

'The Taliban were clearly caught off guard and were slow to react as the men of 4 Troop and 8 Troop began to uncover significant finds. As the company advanced deeper into enemy territory more and more weapons and explosives were uncovered. When the Taliban woke up and began to realise the extent of the operation they rapidly began to muster weapons and organise an ambush against us as we continued to uncover what they had hidden.'

8 Troop was hastily pushed north and occupied a disused compound which it converted into a fire base. As the insurgents probed forward they were swept by machine gun fire and pinned down by mortar and artillery strikes. A circling Predator launched a

Hellfire missile and the ambush fizzled out as quickly as it was organised. The marines eventually withdrew after destroying a suspected command post and IED factory. This raid, albeit modest in its goals, illustrated what the marines could achieve when freed from the burden of manning static patrol bases. It was symptomatic of just how fixed the British task force had become that the marines at FOB Inkerman had to call on fellow marines from the mobile reserve at Kandahar to raid a village just a short walk away from their own location. Operation Gharste Palang also illustrated the confusing nature of fighting in the Green Zone. Later that day a father appeared at the Sangin District Centre cradling two children with shrapnel wounds. They had reportedly been locked up in the compound which had been taken over by the Taliban fighters and had become casualties when the compound was attacked.

Other operations conducted during this period had a certain novelty. It was a remarkable fact that almost three years elapsed between the deployment of a British task force to Helmand Province and the first significant counter-narcotics raid by that force (Operations Mar Kheshta and Ghartse Dagger had been more modest affairs). The belatedness seemed to mirror the general sluggishness of the British response to a war that had begun to slip out of control. Ironically it was Brigadier Messenger's marines – the commander who had vowed that British troops would not become involved in counter-narcotics - who launched this first major raid.

Operation Diesel took weeks to plan and was mounted in the first and second weeks of February. The mission unfolded in cold but sunny conditions, against a ring of drug laboratories in the Alikozai and Alizai tribal lands of Sapwan Qala, in the Upper Sangin Valley. This was the same area that had been visited just eleven months previously by 40 Commando during Operation Ghartse Dagger. 700 men took part making it one of the largest operations mounted by the commandos during their tour. The entire operation was led by Lieutenant Colonel Jim Morris, the Commanding Officer of 42 Commando. The strike force comprised of companies from 42 and 45 Commandos, supported by an armoured infantry company from 1 PWRR, mounted in Warriors. Reconnaissance and cut-off forces were provided by the Brigade Reconnaissance Force and the reconnaissance platoon of 1 PWRR. A British special force element and the American Task Force 31 also took part. The Afghan Army provided an ANA company and Combined Force 333, a counter-narcotics team.[743]

In what had become the standard tactic for British forces, diversionary feints were first mounted in the week preceding the operation, north of Sapwan Qala towards Kajaki, by

the 1 PWRR company and Vikings crewed by the Armoured Support Group, joined by the Brigade Reconnaissance Force. The latter struck an IED while passing through Ghowrak Pass which left two crew of a Jackal seriously injured.

The British placed great faith in these feints, convinced that they deceived the insurgents. It was also possible that the tactic of feinting only served to alert the Taliban in the wider area that a major operation was imminent. The Taliban were not a conventional army that switched forces from one point of the battlefield to another to meet the greatest threat. Most were local men defending their fields and compound farms. Voluble radio chatter, on which the British commonly based their assumptions, was too readily interpreted as confirming the assumptions of the British battle plan, rather than perhaps challenging them. Yankee Company would later interpret the lack of resistance during the assault as a direct result of the feint - 'it was clear that several groups of Taliban had moved out to meet phantom threats as we had hoped' – rather than observing, quite plausibly, that intelligence had exaggerated the insurgent strength in the area and the marines had largely encountered villagers who were poorly equipped to take on the overwhelming firepower of the battlegroup.[744]

Whether or not the diversion had any significant influence on the insurgent dispositions, the feinting force then wheeled about and headed south again, taking positions on a flat expanse of desert about eight kilometres west of Sapwan Qala, in dead ground. This area was designated HLS (Helicopter Landing Site) Willow. Across the River Helmand and to the east, the Brigade Reconnaissance Force, mounted in Jackals, simultaneously occupied positions on high ground overlooking the village, under the cover of darkness. The role of this force was to keep the villages under observation and to protect a second landing site, HLS Oak, which had been selected in a natural hollow in the ground. The third landing site, HLS Cherry, was located to the east of the river Helmand, just 800 metres from the perimeter of one of the target villages.

Three objectives had been designated from previously gathered intelligence. These were known as 'Southern', 'Western' and 'Eastern'. At 1am on the morning of 7 February, RAF Chinook, US Navy Sea Stallions and Royal Navy Sea Kings and Lynx inserted the first wave of assaulting troops. Lima Company of 42 Commando was dropped at HLS Cherry, and the command group with a mortar platoon was dropped at HLS Oak. X-Ray Company from 45 Commando, which had already been pre-deployed by road move to HLS Willow, was picked up and dropped off twenty minutes later at the eastern HLS Oak. In effect, the area of Sapwan Qala was surrounded on both banks of the river. With the

western blocking force in place, provided by Lima Company, X-Ray Company began its advance towards ‘Southern’ objective. The distance the company had to cover was about two kilometres. Heavily laden and marching over broken ground the company took half an hour to arrive at the objectives and shake out. The surprise that had been achieved by the heliborne assault was lost, despite later claims that the operation achieved ‘total surprise’.

As the marines of X-Ray Company began to investigate ‘Southern’ objective sporadic gun battles broke out. Without the benefit of night vision equipment and faced with an overwhelming force, the gunmen were completely over-matched. The gun battles were still running as dawn broke when Yankee Company was airlifted from Camp Bastion, landing at HLS Oak to provide additional reinforcements in the east. In the meantime, Lima Company had managed to secure a fording point over the freezing river, in the vicinity of ‘Western’ Objective and had also become engaged by villagers. In the afternoon Yankee Company joined the fray, occupying and searching ‘Eastern’ objective.

In total, the operation would last two days, during which time there were intermittent gun battles with local villagers, narcotics dealers and insurgents vainly trying to distract and harass the troops. The sheer amount of firepower mustered for Operation Diesel ensured that any attempts to disrupt the raid would fail. The marines reckoned that between 20-30 insurgents were killed, mainly by circling Apache helicopters that were quick to detect any incursions on the security cordons established by the ground forces.

The haul from the raid was certainly impressive. Destroyed precursor chemicals included 5,000 kilograms of ammonium chloride, 1,025 kilograms of acetic anhydride, 300 kilograms of calcium hydroxide and 1,000 kilograms of salt. Around 1,295 kilograms of wet opium was seized, creating a headline figure for the British media of opium seized worth £50 million. This exaggerated figure somewhat distracted from the real cost of the haul to the Taliban, a far smaller figure, and the cost that really mattered. The seizure represented less than one six thousandth of the total opium production in Afghanistan from the previous planting season. For the marines, Operation Diesel was judged a great success. An imaginative and complicated plan had been executed with precision. There were no British or Afghan Army casualties. A signal had been sent to the narco-traffickers and Taliban alike that the drug laboratories that had operated with impunity in the Helmand river valley were fair game.

While 45 Commando slugged it out in the Green Zone, Charlie Strickland’s Commando struck right across the geographical span of Regional Command (South-West). By the end of the six months this unit conducted almost twenty air assault missions,

ten company operations, and thirty odd tasks involving road moves, a truly impressive tempo of operations. These operations lasted from thirty-six hours to one month in duration and by the end of the tour the commandos reckoned that they had conservatively accounted for about 150 insurgents. The marines uncovered about two tons of explosives and over 180 IEDs hidden in caches, as good a haul as any unit would manage.

The first mission undertaken by 42 Commando was under command of the resident Canadian brigade and took place in an area south-west of Kandahar City. In total, the marines would undertake seven operations in support of the Canadians in the Kandahar area. This was an area rarely visited by ISAF and was believed to be an insurgent safe haven. The operation coincided with Ramadan and it was hoped that this coincidence with the religious festival would flush out fighters in the area. Lima Company deployed first, by night, in a road move through Kandahar City, reinforced by a platoon of ANA soldiers. The road move involved seventy-two vehicles, so it would hardly have gone unnoticed.[745] With the marines in blocking positions and with observation posts set on a ridgeline, 3rd Battalion Royal Canadian Regiment (3 RCR) swept into the valley targeting a suspected Taliban command compound. Simultaneously, Kilo Company was airlifted to a nearby village which it cleared after overcoming limited resistance. The presence of a Predator UAV and Apache gave the combined force an edge the local villagers could not match. Over the next five days the marines and Canadians of 3 RCR searched the area making some small finds and occasionally being drawn into sporadic gun battles. Overall, the sweep operation lasted about two weeks. For the commandos this mission was a useful introduction to operations in Kandahar District. For the Canadians it was just one of scores of similar missions that had been undertaken since 2006, without tangible improvement to the overall security of the district.

In early October, 42 Commando mounted Operation Array, again in support of 3 RCR targeting a village called Zalakhan in Panjwayi district. This involved a heliborne assault with Lima and Kilo Companies. Due to some confusion over the helicopter landing sites the operation got off to a poor start but the marines recovered the situation and eventually spent five days in the area making a number of finds. In mid-October, the unit then redeployed to the Dutch base at Tarin Kowt, the provincial capital of Uruzgan, by road and air, in preparation for operations in support of the pressed Dutch contingent.

The subsequent mission – Operation Bor Barakai (‘Great Thunder’) mounted on 24 November 2008 - targeted a collection of villages in the Mirabad Valley west of Tarin Kowt, which was known to be bandit country. Uruzgan province had been hostile to the

presence of Western soldiers from their first arrival in 2004. American task forces had been repeatedly shot at and these in turn had retaliated reinforcing cycles of violence. In the intervening years little had changed and the violence had worsened. Dutch efforts to encourage support for the government in this backward mountainous province were as challenged as British efforts to pacify Helmand. In the end, the hard-pressed Dutch would focus their efforts on just three districts and abandon the other four districts to the Taliban. The hard truth was that the commandos were pushing a boulder up a hill that would roll back as soon as they left, and the Dutch would quit entirely in 2010. This departure was not without regrets for both the Dutch and locals who had benefited from ISAF's presence. When the elders at Tarin Kowt learned of the Dutch government's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, a petition from Ghilzai, Barakzai and Achekzai tribesmen was presented to the Dutch commander begging him to stay. This gesture understandably moved the Dutch soldiers, and represented a gratifying confirmation that their modest efforts had eventually made some difference to this corner of Afghanistan.

By contrast, 42 Commando's assessment of Operation Bor Barakai was typical of the positive spin that gave ISAF a bad name:

'Our aim was to act in true Commando style, using our manoeuvrability, agility and superior strength to unhinge the insurgents and at each stage bite off and own sections of the valley. The Commando Group was postured for all eventualities-to fight or to spend time and patience engaging with the local population. The insurgents did not want to play, affording us the freedom to find his arms and really understand the dynamics of this valley. We proved conventional troops can operate in this key area and have helpfully paved the way for future Dutch activity in the area.'[746]

This optimistic verdict was some way from the truth. The marines spent just ten days in the Mirabad valley, occasionally getting into skirmishes or uncovering weapons caches. Without the numbers to establish a permanent presence, the notion that the marines were in the valley to 'show support, allegiance and improve security' was fanciful. The claim that the dynamics of the valley were understood after a handful of meetings with village elders was also weak. It was true the marines discovered that the Ghilzai – Mullah Omar's kinsmen – were being oppressed by stronger local tribes but following the marines' departure Mirabad reverted to what it always was - deeply conservative, suspicious, and a safe haven for insurgents.[747] By the following year an Australian battlegroup would be mounting yet another major operation in this valley to clear insurgent enclaves. The marines themselves would return to the province in the Shahi Tandar ('Royal Storm')

series of operations in January which in one instance netted over fifty IED pressure plates, a large haul at the time.[748]

In early December, 42 Commando rejoined the Canadian brigade and took part in Operation Janubi Tapu ('Southern Vulture'). The targets were suspected bomb-making factories in the Green Zone west of Kandahar city, and in this instance the intelligence was good. Inserted by helicopter the marines quickly overwhelmed local resistance and began to search the target compounds. Over 600 kilograms of homemade explosives (or enough to make about sixty IEDs), and almost four kilometres of command wire were discovered. Like previous hauls, this cache had to be put into perspective. Against the backdrop of a relentless and increasing IED campaign, this amounted to much less than one week's worth of stocks for local insurgent gangs. 42 Commando would have had to undertake scores more operations of this scale to have had any measurable effect on the proliferation of homemade bombs – indeed, IED production would spike that summer despite the efforts of operations like Janubi Tapu. The operation ended on a fortuitous note when the marines managed to stop a suicide bomber on a motorbike, before he was able to detonate his vest.

All these operations were a prelude to what would be the main effort for 3 Commando Brigade on Operation Herrick 9: wresting Nad-e Ali District back into government hands. The situation in Nad-e Ali in the winter of 2008 was complex, contradictory and in the long-term intolerable to the provincial government in Lashkar Gah. All that separated Lashkar Gah from Nad-e Ali District was a stretch of the Helmand River and Bolan Bridge. Governor Mangal's writ really only extended as far as the last grubby police post on the western end of the bridge. Beyond that, powerful land-owners, narcotics traffickers and freelancing insurgent gangs were the real power-brokers. As Michael Martin's outstanding study *War on its Head* has argued: 'Apart from the Taliban-era, there were no centrally appointed, non-indigenous, non-mujahidin' officials in Nad-e Ali between Habibullah leaving in 1990 as Chief of Police and returning in 2008 with the support of the British as District Governor.'[749] Instead, there were over twenty competing tribal groups compressed in Nad-e Ali and a large annual poppy harvest that meant the district was highly valued by the insurgency as a source of funds. Alongside Marjah and Nawa districts, Nad-e Ali encompassed some of the richest agricultural lands in Helmand. It had also become a place where former officials with grudges against the new order had retired to their estates stirring trouble. In the late summer of 2008, as we have seen, this antagonism appeared to erupt in a march on the capital by a large number of insurgents.

The march fizzled out but the Governor was alarmed enough to determine that the barbarians on the other side of the river had to be dealt with once and for all.

Nad-e Ali District had a broader significance to the British. This was the original Afghan Development Zone that had been proposed in the 2006 Helmand Plan and which had been completely ignored as the British task force found itself dragged away from the provincial capital to far-flung outposts of the province. The majority of Helmand's population lived in this central area. The British would now attempt to impose order in Nad-e Ali, almost three years late, but the prize, if they succeeded would be great. The war was never going to be won in towns like Sangin. In Nad-e Ali the British had some hope of demonstrating success and withdrawing, eventually, with dignity.

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Operation Sond Chara ('Red Dagger', after the Commando insignia) was the largest operation of the tour and it coincided with appalling winter weather. Tracks became rutted, ditches overtopped their banks and fields became flooded. For many of the marines who took part in the operation, the mud and cold became the chief enemy. For their commander, Brigadier Messenger, the principal challenge was numerical. Nad-e Ali District roughly encompassed an area of 200 square kilometres. The three battlegroups under his immediate command – 45 Commando, 2 RGR and 1 Rifles – were all committed to holding a string of FOBs and patrol bases across the province. This meant that Messenger only had the theatre reserve, 42 Commando, at his disposal to support the newly created Battlegroup Centre South, commanded by Colonel Martin Smith. This force would only be able to concentrate in a limited geographical area, and, crucially, would not be able to remain behind to hold any ground cleared of insurgents. If the strategy was clear-hold-build, then the brigade would only be solving the first part of the formula, for a period of two weeks, and in a small number of areas.

This, in effect, is what transpired. Every village the marines tackled had to be revisited again by successor units within months: Khowshal Kalay in April (Operation Tor Paraang), which led to the building of CPs Paraang and Haji Alem; Zarghun Kalay in June (Operation Tor Had Jaar) which was consolidated with PB Khuday Noor; Gorup-e Shesh Kalay ('Group Six Village') in August, which was secured with PB Shamal Storrai; and Shin Kalay in November (Operation Tor Sara) which resulted in the construction of several more checkpoints. In 2010, the Grenadier Guards would find themselves repeating the whole process once again. They would be followed by the Duke of Lancaster's Regiment and it was not until the completion of the Royal Irish tour in the spring of 2011

that the areas visited by the marines could finally be judged to be relatively secure. Two years later, a village like Zarghun Kalay which featured prominently in Sond Chara would still be proving troublesome in an area known as ‘the red wedge’. Operation Sond Chara was only ever going to be the start of a very long game. The subsequent brigade would have to begin exploiting any successes gained by the marines when it arrived in the spring. Without a well-resourced reconstruction plan in place to follow the marines, Operation Sond Chara represented the last time the British ‘mowed the lawn’.

3 Commando Brigade naturally promoted Operation Sond Chara as the highlight operation of their tour but in truth it was both an unrealistic and over-ambitious mission. A measure of the unrealism was the fact that the Brigade HQ was already planning the second phase – Operation Sond Chara 2 – which would have seen the marines assaulting villages in neighbouring Babaji District. Sond Chara 2 eventually became the genesis of Operation Panchai Palang (‘Panther’s Claw’) executed by 19 Light Brigade in the summer.[750]

The other striking feature about Sond Chara was that the investment of Nad-e Ali was viewed through the lens of a conventional warfare telescope. The plan concocted would not have been out of place in the Falklands Conflict. The marines proposed to secure a line of departure then assault a series of objectives (villages), in sequence, as if they were attacking a regular enemy holding fixed positions. This was not the enemy they faced and this was not the problem in Nad-e Ali. The ‘enemy’ was local villagers, as much as committed Taliban, a point that became immediately evident as the marines were met with gun fire as soon as they entered any area (repeating their experience of the 2006-07 tour). And the problem was really a complex web of inter-tribal politics, local power struggles between various personalities in the greater Lashkar Gah area, and the entrenched interests of the narcotics business. This problem could not be solved with high explosives. 3 Commando Brigade was necessarily ignorant of these complexities. In the same way that the paratroopers had blundered across northern Helmand in the summer of 2006 and had become embroiled in local conflicts they did not understand, so the marines would be repeating this exercise across central Helmand. What saved Sond Chara was the fact that the British had now committed to Nad-e Ali for the long term.

Because Operation Sond Chara was intended as the centre piece of the tour, Messenger was able to scrape soldiers from other parts of the brigade, as well as from allies, eventually mustering a 1,500 strong force. In addition to 42 Commando, British units involved included B Company 1 Rifles, C Company 2 PWRR, a reinforced A Squadron

QDG, elements from 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery, and 24 Commando Engineer Regiment. The Danish Jutland Dragoons Regiment provided a mechanised company, additional engineers, and a troop of Leopard tanks. An Estonian mechanised company, mortar platoon, and ANA *kandak* also joined the operation. Special force elements were provided by the American Task Force 71. The use of main battle tanks on Operation Sond Chara meant that the Royal Marines became the first British contingent to use these powerful platforms to support an operation. The Taliban feared tanks, perhaps as a result of their experience of a Soviet tank regiment that swept through Nad-e Ali in 1983 blasting their positions with impunity. The British never demonstrated the will or desire to overcome the logistic difficulties of deploying a tank squadron to Helmand. Cost constraints also played a part. Had they done so, they would have re-discovered the great versatility and utility of the tank in counter-insurgency operations. Tank fire was accurate, devastating and caused minimal collateral damage. The psychological effect of tanks was also invaluable: their presence alone could persuade insurgents to disperse and lie low. When US marines eventually took over northern Helmand and the Sangin Valley from the British they brought with them seventeen M1A1 Abrams which meant that alone of all the major national contingents, only the British did not deploy tanks to south-west Afghanistan.

A subsidiary operation took place on 7 December (called Operation Marlin), a night-time raid on a suspected weapons and drugs cache in neighbouring Nawa District. One company of marines took part in the raid supported by Afghan counter-narcotics police and a special force unit. This netted around 400 kilograms of wet opium as well as a cache of RPGs, mortar bombs and other weaponry. In the meantime, on the western edge of Nad-e Ali, between the villages of Shin Kalay (‘Green Village’) and Khowshal Kalay (‘Happy Village’), a combined force of Danish Leopard tanks and British Scimitar reconnaissance vehicles began a series of feinting attacks along the length of the Nahr-e Bugra canal. Khowshal Kalay was a settlement with perhaps 2,000 tribesmen mostly inhabited by Noorzai. Just under half of the villagers, however, were a mix of Achekzai and Popalzai. All three had links with the narcotics trade and were profoundly suspicious of Western soldiers. The name ‘Happy Village’ was somewhat unfortunate. It was here that the Soviet Army rounded up and massacred possibly as many as 200 men during the Eid al-Adha in 1981.[751] Women were also reportedly raped and livestock slaughtered. This was the single worst atrocity committed in Helmand during the Soviet tenure. The event, understandably, was widely remembered. Any local with a memory of that day was likely to view the arrival of more foreign soldiers as a poor harbinger.

The aim of these attacks was to draw insurgents to the edge of the Green Zone and away from central Nad-e Ali where the main assault would be mounted, although there no evidence that this actually happened. The appearance of tanks certainly provoked great excitement and an inevitable response from insurgents in the immediate area. For the Danish tank crewmen the ensuing skirmishes were all one-sided. Their thermal sights could pick out human targets at ranges of two kilometres allowing the tanks to loiter in the desert at stand-off distances and engage insurgents as they appeared in the hedgerows and tree lines of the Green Zone. The latter resorted to lobbing 107mm rockets at the tanks, but these were wildly inaccurate and would have made little impression against the armour even if they had registered a lucky hit. The Scimitars also joined in the fray with 30mm cannon fire. By the end of the day, the tanks had fired off thirty-one rounds and the insurgents' appetite for further confrontation waned with the setting sun.

H-Hour for the main phase of Operation Sond Chara was set at 7pm on the night of 11 December.[752] Kilo Company was lifted by helicopter to a point in the desert immediately west of Khowshal Kalay nicknamed Barbarian, which would become the location of a Patrol Base 1. The idea seems to have been to create an anchor at this point to secure an eight kilometre levee track that paralleled the Trik Zabur canal south-east to a second major crossroads. This was where the Brigade Reconnaissance Force that had been hiding in the desert would establish a Patrol Base 9, also known as Stella. The levee track, nicknamed Route Somerset, would act as the supply route between the two patrol bases. The crossroads, known as Five-ways Junction, would become a key disputed node in Operation Moshtarak, twelve months later in the winter of 2010. What Strickland hoped to achieve by securing this track (an impossibility anyway) remains unclear – was this meant to be a line of departure, block, gun line, or a mix of all three?

Regardless, both Kilo Company and the Brigade Reconnaissance Force immediately met significant resistance. It was clear that villagers at Khowshal Kalay and Five-ways Junction were extremely hostile to the presence of ISAF. Despite this reception, Lima Company, supported by sappers from 24 Commando Engineer Regiment, and with a gun troop from 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery in tow, then proceeded down Route Somerset to set up a third patrol base and gun line. With all three sub-units in place it was judged that phase one had been successfully completed.

This proved wishful thinking. The heavens opened making re-supply difficult. Besieged by increasingly accurate fire the marines responded with even greater amounts of firepower. The stalemate continued for a matter of days before the marines were pulled

out to support subsequent phases of the operation. Route Somerset would become one of the most heavily seeded tracks with IEDs in Nad-e Ali and Patrol Base 1 would be abandoned (later re-established as PB Silab). In the case of Patrol Base 9 (Stella) no British unit would ever reach that far south again, a measure of the over-ambition of Sond Chara. Eventually a USMC detachment would establish a security post at this important junction and rename it PB Reilly.

The key objective of Operation Sond Chara was Nad-e Ali itself, the settlement that gave its name to the district, and the location where the Argylls and latterly Juliet Company had set up a patrol base. This was the objective for the second phase of the operation.

Nad-e Ali was the site of an old fort which the British had reputedly once invested. The fort itself pre-dated the Anglo-Afghan Wars and was now in a completely derelict state with only two turrets and its walls standing. The central courtyard, a flat dust bowl, was the size of a large football pitch. This was what the British were after. Nad-e Ali offered the ideal location for a substantial base in the centre of this lawless district. Once established this base could act as a mother ship for an expanding matrix of patrol bases across the district. American engineers that worked on the canal projects in the 1950s had similarly based themselves here in what was then known as 'Fort Nad-i-ali', before moving to the expanding Lashkar Gah. Aside from the fort, Nad-e Ali was also important because it was a focal point for trading in the local area. Over decades, perhaps originally encouraged by the presence of a garrison, a cruciform of bazaars had grown alongside the fort. These shops sprawled for several hundred metres along the four points of the compass. The only other buildings of note were the disused school (PB Argyll); and a handful of pre-fabricated buildings on the southern edge of the fort, which the marines would later rename Minerva Lines. The silhouette of two Roshan towers in the centre of the settlement fixed it on the skyline for miles around.

The plan for the investment of Nad-e Ali was described by Lieutenant Colonel Strickland in these words. 'We assaulted at night,' he wrote, 'K Company went to an area of compounds…then we pushed Lima Company some 6 km to the south east to act as a block to cut off the routes from the South. Simultaneous with that we moved our Commando Recce Force in from the eastern side again to seize another area [on] a main dominating route.' [753]

The night-time assault came as a complete surprise and without any insurgent presence in the bazaar area itself Kilo Company was able to quickly establish a patrol base with

little interference. As in previous operations of this type, the insertion and initial lodgement were the least difficult tasks. Once the local villagers had sized up the marines in their midst, 'fierce fighting ensued'.[754] These over-excited attempts to dislodge the marines were easily repulsed. The gunmen in Nad-e Ali were neither well-led nor organised. In the preceding years the town had grown fat and comfortable on the narcotics trade. Apart from the aborted march on Lashkar Gah earlier that summer, there was little experience of fighting the British. Many of the gunmen firing on the marines were very probably just local farmers reacting reflexively to the arrival of Western soldiers in their fields. Over the next twelve months Nad-e Ali would settle down again, and much like Musa Qaleh, re-establish itself as a narcotics trading hub, but under the protection of the British. For the stall holders, it little mattered who was in charge as long as they were allowed to pursue their lucrative business.

As the immediate environs of Nad-e Ali were being secured, Juliet Company, supported by C Company 2 PWRR and an Afghan platoon, advanced on the village of Shin Kalay which lay just two kilometres east of Nad-e Ali. The shortest resupply route from Camp Bastion to Nad-e Ali lay through Shin Kalay. This village of around 100 compounds illustrated some of the contradictions the British would be facing in Nad-e Ali District. It was entirely populated by Kharotei who ran their own village militia, not to protect themselves against the Taliban who respected and generally avoided their lands, but to ward off the rapacious Noorzai policemen. To complicate the picture, there were significant local rivalries within the community, and there is good evidence that the ISI, or proxies, destroyed the school in the settlement.[755] The approaching marines were predictably met by hails of gunfire and Juliet Company responded heavy-handedly by calling in support from Apaches, Cobras and F-16s. After about two hours of fruitless exchanges of fire the fighting suddenly stopped and the marines found themselves being welcomed into the village – as long as they kept the Afghan police out, a promise they could not reasonably keep. 'Green flags of celebration were seen flying over residential compound,' it was reported, and the white flags of the Taliban disappeared.[756]

To sustain a long-term presence in Nad-e Ali, the route through Shin Kalay would have to be secured. The obvious risk was that the Taliban would swiftly identify this as a vulnerable point and seed the track with IEDs. Over the course of the following year the British would in fact build check points at kilometre intervals on this route to keep the lifeline open. The risk, fortunately for the British, proved small. The Kharotei of Shin Kalay mostly kept their part of the bargain, and remained on the government side.

At this stage of Operation Sond Chara the marines basically had a toehold in Nad-e Ali and a second further south. Messenger knew that he had to maintain momentum and push on to the next objective. To this end, 42 Commando re-grouped and were joined by the Estonian mechanised company for the next phase of the operation – the clearance of Zarghun Kalay ('Green Village'), a village four kilometres to the north-west of Nad-e Ali. This operation was again commanded by Colonel Smith, leaving Strickland to consolidate his gains in central Nad-e Ali.

Zarghun Kalay, from the air, was a model American-built village. Perfectly square and laid out within a one kilometre grid pattern, the carefully ordered tidiness had since become compromised by Afghan indifference to the right angle, but it still looked quite unlike most other Afghan villages. During the Soviet-Afghan War this settlement had suffered extensive damage. Memories of the fighting were long and foreign soldiers were not welcome. Ironically, because of the resistance put up by the village, the marines were forced to indulge in a little destruction themselves, adding to the prejudice against foreigners.

Zarghun Kalay differed from typical Afghan villages in another important way – the land had been distributed equally amongst almost twenty different tribes which left the village without an obvious leader, a vacuum that the Taliban filled. Intelligence suggested that insurgents were now camped in strength at Zarghun Kalay, and that they were supported by foreign fighters. According to Michael Martin, a call went out for defenders across Nad-e Ali. This received a good response: as many as eleven known commanders pitched up with their men.[757] The entire operation, therefore, was conducted much like an old-fashioned village assault a wartime veteran might have recognised. The last significant feature of Zarghun Kalay was that it sat in the middle of an expanse of flat, open fields. At the height of winter, the cover offered by the few hedgerows and tree lines that delineated field boundaries was poor. The advancing marines would be very exposed.

The plan for assaulting Zarghun Kalay effectively involved surrounding the village from three sides. The Estonian mechanised company would bypass north to a settlement called Chah-e Anjir Kalay ('Fig Tree Well'). This was a key village astride a wadi at the base of the block of land known as 'the Chah-e Anjir Triangle' or CAT. The 1 PWRR reconnaissance platoon mounted in Scimitars would feint north to Chah-e Mirza ('Mirza's Well') and then swing right to support the assault from the west. Juliet Company would secure a line of departure about two kilometres south of the village in the vicinity of Luy Bagh. Finally, Lima Company which had marched all the way from Route Somerset in the

south would pass through Juliet Company and attack on an axis south to north.[758]

The assault on Zarghun Kalay began on the morning of 17 December in a tremendous downpour of rain. It did not stop raining for the next three days – the time it took to secure the village and the surrounding area. As one gunner who took part in the operation wrote: 'We were up to our ankles in muddy water…with the rain bouncing off our faces'. [759] This had a deleterious effect on any airborne sensors, whether a UAV or a pilot's targeting pod, but it also had terrible effects on ground systems, in particular the Bowman radios which were prone to failure in the heavy rain. Vehicle-mounted radios were especially vulnerable as water entered vital electronic components. Faced with these appalling conditions, the battle to clear the village was described as 'gritty', and it 'saw the fiercest and most sustained fighting of the operation, taking two days to break into the town'.[760] Unable to make great headway, by the afternoon of the first day the marines started calling in artillery fire from 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery. By mid-afternoon, Lima Company had succeeded in securing some compounds at the southern edge of the village but could make no further headway against a very determined enemy. At nightfall the fighting paused, both sides beaten by the weather, but it resumed once again at daybreak on the following day.

By now the incessant pressure was beginning to tell on the insurgents whose ammunition supplies and morale were running low. The Estonian LAVs (Light Armoured Vehicles) were proving especially useful with their heavy machine guns mounted high on a turret that offered good all-round visibility.[761] For a marine hugging the ground, the field of view could be the next hedge. An Estonian gunner in comparison could peer right into the village. American Cobra and British Apache eventually joined in the fray, once the low cloud began to break, making successive attack runs against suspected insurgent positions. A Harrier and GMLRS strike were also called.

It seems that this aerial pummelling proved decisive. By now Smith had surrounded the village on three flanks, leaving only the northern side open. In the end, this was the route the insurgents chose to make good their getaway. It took a further twenty-four hours for the village to be secured, compound by compound and no bodies were found. On 19 December, a village shura was convened attended by over 200 local men. Governor Habibullah and Colonel Allawullah, the Afghan *kandak* commander, presented the Afghan face at the meeting. Smith attended but remained in the background. The shura was almost certainly attended by some of the fighters, curious to see their recent enemy. Like the villagers at Shin Kalay, this was another community that initially appeared to need little

persuasion to switch to the government side. A patrol base would be built on a crossroads north of Zarghum Kalay (PB Khuday Noor) but Zarghun Kalay would then lapse back into the hands of the insurgency, especially in the area west of the village.

The next objective lay three kilometres further north in the sprawling settlement of Chah-e Anjir. This was really two settlements separated by a ford that crossed an east-west running wadi. The Shamalan canal ('North Wind canal'), an important waterway that defined the border between Nad-e Ali and Babaji Districts ran just east of Chah-e Anjir, eventually joining the river Helmand further downstream on a prominent bend. The ground here was quite different to central Nad-e Ali being more broken and with many uncultivated patches. To the west of the town was an area of derelict factories and run-down modern buildings which the British would grab and transform into PB Shahzad ('Prince'). This was where the Helmand Construction Corporation had once based itself providing local employment to the area. The Russians occupied the very same spot and just north of the abandoned industrial site was a large graveyard of vehicles including military vehicles. 'The tank park', as it became known, was a salutary reminder of the fate of the last foreign army that tried its luck in northern Nad-e Ali, a fate which the British were keen to avoid. Chah-e Anjir was a fault line of tribal enmities. The dominant Noorzai were hated by the Kharotei and this encouraged the latter to join the insurgency. The Kharotei in turn were hated by the Popalzai, who bore an ancient grudge against the former, and this encouraged the Popalzai to become insurgents. The British were now about to become yet another party to this feuding.

The last phase of Sond Chara began on 23 December and involved C Company PWRR with Lima Company moving north from Shin Kalay to a Forming Up Point (FUP), in preparation for an advance on the village of Saheb Kalay. This was the location of a check point known as Yellow 4 that observed the main wadi leading south-east to Chah-e Anjir. The plan was to secure this check point that would act as a command post and rendezvous point for elements of 42 Commando that would conduct a heliborne assault on Chah-e-Anjir. Juliet Company followed on behind, sweeping through Chah-e Mirza and encountered no active resistance. Lima Company arrived at Yellow 4 and briefly became embroiled in a shoot out with local villagers before securing the area. After a significant amount of re-organisations, not helped by the fact that vehicles were beginning to break down after all the wear and tear of the last two weeks, the scene was set for the last action of Sond Chara.

The assault on Chah-e Anjir began in the early hours of Christmas morning, an

awkward emotional moment for the troops who knew that elsewhere in Helmand their fellow marines and soldiers would be suspending operations – albeit briefly – to celebrate the festivities. Accurate intelligence had identified an insurgent compound and this was quickly occupied. Finds included drugs, bomb-making kit and weapons. After an 'initially fierce break-in battle', the insurgents packed in the fight and dispersed from the area.[762] Unbeknown to the marines, the lack of resistance may have been largely attributable to a complex web of family relations in Chah-e Anjir that kept the 'Taliban' out of the settlement, and as importantly, maintained a monopoly over the drugs bazaar.[763]

Whatever its faults, Operation Sond Chara had been a testament to the endurance of the marines and soldiers who took part in the operation. The weather had been appalling. Lima Company reportedly marched sixty kilometres over the course of the two weeks, recalling the more famous yomps of the Falklands Conflict.[764] This seems an exaggerated claim, unless like the rhyme of the Duke of York, the marines were being marched up and down a hill - nonetheless, they did do a lot of walking in pretty poor weather. The meticulous sequencing of the operation across such a large block of Green Zone had resembled a complicated chess game.

Most strikingly – and in contrast to the later Operation Panchai Palang conducted by 19 Light Brigade in Babaji District – the marines set about their task with tremendous tempo. No other British brigade would cover so much ground, so quickly in the entire war. This was partly attributable to the lack of IEDs. Just eleven were found. It was never clear however whether this reflected a lack of insurgent bomb-making skills in Nad-e Ali, or whether the speed of operations and the switches in direction and effort meant that insurgent gangs were never able to successfully target the marines. The latter explanation is not implausible – once the troops went static in the patrol bases in Nad-e Ali, they were quickly surrounded by IED fields. Speed and mobility had been the keys to the tactical success of the operation.

Colonel Martin Smith was being overly optimistic when he commented at the conclusion of the operation that 'peace is returning to the heart of the district'.[765] More realistically he did concede that permanent security would require more effort, an effort beyond his battlegroup. Satisfactory security would only truly begin to be established eighteen months later when the British area of operations was effectively reduced to Nad-e Ali and the adjoining Babaji District. A Military Stabilisation and Support Team (MSST) was despatched to the area but without a credible reconstruction plan to follow on the military operation, this represented a token gesture. Although Operation Sond Chara was

only a beginning, the British enjoyed a crucial trump card that would help every succeeding brigade deployed to Nad-e Ali. To date the British had had awful luck with the district governors who as a class had proved to be a gang of corrupt incompetents. Governor Habibullah, an ex-Communist era police chief, was the exception that proved the rule. Industrious and relatively honest he was the perfect ally. When a Guards battalion assumed control of the area in the following spring they cultivated him with all the smooth charm that comes with the Guards ethos. Habibullah was nobody's fool (in fact, his record as the former police chief of Gereshk was dubious), but a little grace and courtesy certainly helped to oil the relationship. Crucially, Habibullah knew many of the Taliban commanders personally and was able to use his influence on these personalities to maintain a relative peace.

The successful conclusion of Operation Sond Chara came with a cost. Lance Corporal Ben Whatley was killed on Christmas Eve in the battle for Zarghun Kalay. This had been his second tour of Afghanistan. Marines Georgie Evans and Tony Sparks had earlier been killed when they were struck by an RPG on a roof top. Sparks was a teenager who had only passed out of basic training the previous July. Corporal Robert Deering was killed rushing to save colleagues in a Viking personnel carrier that had struck an IED. He stepped on a second IED, a common occurrence in incidents of this type. Deering had already served in Iraq and Afghanistan on previous tours. Rifleman Nash, a twenty-one year old mechanical engineer from Sydney who joined the British Army for adventure was shot and killed, also at Zarghun Kalay. Three British civilians also unusually lost their lives on Operation Sond Chara.[766] Enemy losses were uncertain but the marines estimated that perhaps as many as thirty insurgents were killed.

The close and treacherous nature of the fighting in the Green Zone continued to inspire acts of great bravery. On 9 February, Lance Corporal Matthew Croucher – a reservist – found himself undertaking a compound search with the Brigade Reconnaissance Force. As he led the way through a darkened room he set off a trip wire. Looking down, he caught sight of a live grenade at his feet. In his own words, he 'felt a bit guilty for setting the device off', and took the decision to lie backwards on the grenade to protect his comrades. His backpack and body armour took the force of the blast and he miraculously escaped without serious injury.[767] The ruptured backpack was eventually retired to the Imperial War Museum. Croucher collected a George Cross for this astonishing act of selflessness.

For 42 Commando, Operation Sond Chara was barely concluded when the unit was called forward again to take part in a combined operation in the Kandahar area. Operation

Shahi Tandar (‘Royal Storm’) took place in miserable weather north of Kandahar on 7-9 January. The target was a collection of around fifty compounds which were believed to include weapon caches and bomb-making factories. The commandos rejoined the Canadian 3 RCR battlegroup for this operation and were supported by a contingent of ANA. Following the pattern established in their very first mission the marines assaulted at night by helicopter and then linked up with the Canadian armoured force that advanced to the objective in daylight. The assault achieved surprise and the intelligence was sound. Eight insurgents were detained, a rarity as Taliban foot soldiers mostly fled when faced with overwhelming forces. A search of the compounds yielded AK-47s, grenades, anti-personnel mines, pressure plates, large quantities of high explosives and the inevitable opium bags. The marines also found ball bearings, an ominous sign as these indicated that the technology to manufacture directional fragmentation charges – a sort of poor man’s Claymore mine – had migrated to south-west Afghanistan. These had first made their appearance in Iraq but they had a long pedigree extending back to organisations like Hezbollah and ultimately to Iran. Smaller operations followed but these were all a prelude to the last big push which 3 Commando Brigade would make before handing over to the successor brigade. For this last phase, the attention of the marines turned southward again.

Southern Helmand seemed to hold a fascination for the commandos. No other units would spend as much time in Rig and Dishu Districts, or drive as many miles over this largely uninhabited area. British maps ran out before the Pakistan border (incidentally scotching conspiracy theories that the British were conducting covert cross-border raids). The entire area was a lawless smugglers’ paradise and major transit point for the narcotics trade, most notably at Bahram Chah where opium was traded openly. The end-of-the world feeling of this desolate border area was magnified by the extreme poverty of its inhabitants. There were no schools, clinics or roads anywhere south of the Helmand River. Electricity was non-existent. The mostly Baluchi and Achakzai population lived a marginal existence in every sense of the word and a majority would have been quite content for the war to pass them by like a sandstorm on the horizon. The Kuchi nomads that criss-crossed the ill-defined border area remained oblivious to the modern world and observed British patrols with the indifference of a people that had witnessed many comings and goings in the past.

ISAF would also have probably preferred to ignore this area altogether except that it represented a major transit route for the insurgency. The Green Zone of Darvishan – the only major town in the south - had been mainly populated by Ishaqzai. South of this tribal group, Alizai settlements had grown on the bend of the Helmand River. A string of Noorzai

and more Ishaqzai villages followed the course of the river to its final destination in the Sistani marshlands. All these communities had links with fellow tribesmen in Taliban strongholds like Sangin. The Noorzai were heavily represented in the ANP, driven by poverty to become policemen rather than by notions of serving the community. They brought with them clannish ways and a corrupt accommodation with fellow Noorzai who had opted to join the insurgency instead to make a living. The border police were evenly split between Noorzai and Achakzai. To avoid drug disputes police operations were run on tribal lines, each leaning favourably towards their own kinsmen. The British did not have the strength to secure southern Helmand but neither was Messenger prepared to simply ignore this southern flank. Some of marines' most daring raids had been conducted south of Darvishan in the winter of 2006-07. This would be the last fling before the British abandoned the area and handed it over to US marines in the summer.

Southern Helmand was the responsibility of the QDG battlegroup led by Lieutenant Colonel Alan Richmond. The task facing this commanding officer was quite beyond his resources. The battlegroup comprised of two infantry companies – both of which were needed to hold Darvishan and the surrounding satellite patrol bases - one formation reconnaissance squadron, and half a dozen Mastiffs. On any given day Richmond had less than twenty 'runners' (serviceable vehicles) to patrol an area of more than 15,000 square kilometres. Because this battlegroup was not considered the main British effort Richmond had no mortars (a boon for the Taliban who could mortar at will without fear of retaliation), and the cavalrymen were at the bottom of the pile when bidding for scarce helicopters. The best Richmond could do was to secure Darvishan – which his soldiers managed after a fashion, gun battles declined from one a day to one every three days – and prevent Taliban infiltration up 'the Snakes Head', the meander of the river south of Darvishan. The pity was that a genuine local desire to see off the Taliban, or at least end the fighting seemed to exist in the area. A shura organised at the beginning of the tour attracted 1,200 locals clamouring for security and development. The British could only placate, make promises, and wait for the US marines to arrive. To take the fight to the insurgents would have required the deployment of a second full infantry battalion, which the British did not have.

In late January, Operation Kapcha Salaam ('Cobra Salute') was launched in the area of two villages called Lakari and Koshtay. The latter was the scene of the commandos' sneaky raid in 2006, which had involved swimming the Helmand River. The soldiers met predictable resistance from suspicious villagers and at one point over-ran their maps before withdrawing north. Then on 2 February, 42 Commando began what would be a

month long series of operations codenamed Aabi Toorah (‘Blue Sword’). These were really a series of sequenced missions. The first phase – Aabi Toorah 2b - saw the marines deploying to an area known as ‘the Fish Hook’ from the shape of the Helmand River that coils west at this point. The second phase would see the marines leap 120 kilometres north to Marjah district near Lashkar Gah.

The overall aim of the Aabi Toorah operations was information gathering. At the time, what the British knew about these areas could be summarized in a single, thin brief. Staying in the field for a month demanded endurance and severely stretched the resources of the Joint Helicopter Force. By the end of the operation almost seventy tons of supplies were either heli-lifted or air-dropped to the marines from RAF C-130s. This was true expeditionary warfare. To alleviate the problem of resupply and to provide additional firepower, 42 Commando split into two groupings: a Manoeuvre Operations Group, or MOG, that included Viking, Jackals and resupply trucks; and a heliborne element that secured areas ahead of the MOG.

The insertion into the Fish Hook proceeded without incident. The MOG drove the 100 kilometres south from Camp Bastion and pre-positioned itself in the desert west of the Green Zone. With this force in place, 300 marines and an ANA company were dropped by Chinook in the vicinity of a village called Divalak, on the banks of the Helmand River. At this point in the course of the river the Green Zone was barely one kilometre wide and much of the land was uncultivated scrub. There were a number of ‘significant contacts’ with local tribesmen but little sign of Taliban strongholds.[768] Impromptu shuras were held but it is difficult to believe the marines were met with anything less than scepticism, if not outright puzzlement. There was no concentration of Taliban in this area (two years later, following a successful special force operation against Bahram Chah which left over fifty insurgents dead including foreign fighters, the bazaar at Safar on the Fish Hook would become a major transit point). The main Taliban enclave was twenty kilometres to the west, in a settlement called Khan Neshin.

Khan Neshin had once been a military garrison, established by a forgotten potentate on a strategic fording point on the Helmand River. A village had grown to the north-west of the fort – Zaman Khan Kalay – and a second fort, Kala Shureh, stood three kilometres to the west. These medieval forts were now in ruins and indeed the entire area was littered with abandoned compounds that were slowly being reclaimed by the elements, all of which created a perfect stronghold for nacro-traffickers and insurgents alike. Among these were Pakistani foreign fighters. From a distance there was almost a romantic appeal to

Khan Neshin with its once proud ramparts defining the horizon and with the U-bend of the river as a backdrop. Closer inspection revealed dilapidation, decay and scores of ditches, which the marines would have to negotiate on foot to reach their objective.

One week after arriving in the area – on 29 February – the combined force gathered to the north-west of the town in preparation for the assault. Intelligence had suggested that Khan Neshin was a 'hotbed of Taliban activity' and so it proved.[769] Lima Company was transported by Vikings in darkness to the lines of departure and then completed a six kilometre approach march across very difficult ground broken by numerous deep ditches. The Brigade Reconnaissance Force, mounted on Jackals, covered their approach from a western flank. Kilo Company was inserted by helicopter south-west of their objectives. At dawn, Lima Company advanced cautiously into the settlement which appeared deserted. This proved to be a lull before the storm. Shortly after 9.30am gun fire erupted which would last most of the rest of the morning. The fighting intensified around the bazaar area where it became desperately close with both sides trading hand grenades at one stage. A more unpleasant surprise was two suicide bombers who attempted to assail the marines of Kilo Company. Both managed to get close of their targets before detonating their explosive vests. No marine was injured but the spectacle of dismembered body parts turned stomachs. Eventually an Apache put paid to this resistance and scattered the remaining gunmen. Fleeing south and east, they were not seen again. Six dead insurgents were found along with a large amount of weapons and drugs.[770]

For the rest of the week 42 Commando remained in the area gathering information, assisted by the ANA. For the last phase of the operation – from 7-14 March – the marines travelled forty kilometres west to two remote settlements close to the border with Nimruz Province. This was the furthest point any British unit would explore on the Helmand River in remote southern Helmand. It was not improbable that the inhabitants of Malah Khan and Taghaz had never seen a European. Beyond these two villages that sat in the lee of the 4,500 foot Khan Neshin Gha was a wilderness punctuated by isolated kalays clinging to the ever-dwindling flow of the Helmand River. This was the end of the line. In the summer these villagers broiled under a relentless sun and in the winter they waited for the rains further north to refill the river, allowing subsistence agriculture to flourish along its banks. The marines inquired about the needs of the villagers, as if modern infrastructure would ever reach these isolated communities, but their only real needs were the cycles of nature. This exotic time travel – for so it must have seemed for the young men from Plymouth, Portsmouth or Poole – ended abruptly with 42 Commando on the move again, this time to

the Taliban heartlands of Marjah and Nawa districts.

The second phase of Operation Aabi Toorah – Aabi Toorah 2c - started in the third week of March and lasted three days. As in Operation Sond Chara the marines called on the services of the Danish Leopard tanks. For the Danish tank crews based at FOB Price this was a considerable hike – forty kilometres as the crow flies – disproving doubters who argued that main battle tanks would be unable to cope with the demands of the unforgiving terrain. The remainder of the 700 strong force comprised 42 Commando and an ANA contingent mentored by 1 Rifles. The American Task Force 31 also took part in the operation. About a third of the battlegroup was lifted into the target area by Chinooks, Royal Navy Sea Kings, and USMC Sea Stallions. The remainder made the approach in a convoy protected by Vikings. Fire support was lavish: Apache, Cobra, an American B1-B bomber, GMLRS, and the Light Guns of 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery were all made available to Lieutenant Colonel Strickland.

The aim of the operation was to disrupt Taliban groups operating in the Trikh Nawa area. This was ‘mowing the lawn’ by any other name as the British did not have the numbers to permanently hold this area and there was no follow-up reconstruction plan. Trikh Nawa was a triangle of Green Zone west of Lashkar Gah, on the elbow joint of Nad-e Ali and Marjah Districts. The area was broken by a complex pattern of canals and ditches that made access, except on foot, very challenging. The tribal layout was mixed and fractious.

Kilo Company was inserted first at dawn, followed by the Brigade Reconnaissance Force, to form an outer cordon. The former landed in what became a running mêlée of anti-aircraft and ground fire from twenty-three separate firing points.[771] The insurgent armoury included heavy machine guns as well as a rare Chinese, truck-mounted SPG-9 recoilless rifle. In the ensuing confusion three insurgents who accidentally drove their saloon car into the middle of the marines’ position were shot dead.[772] More insurgents were subsequently killed in close fighting. As at Khan Neshin, at one stage the marines found themselves trading hand grenades between lines of ditches.

Lima Company then followed, dropped off in the desert west of the first target known as Objective Silver. Each marine was carrying around 100 kilograms in weight, a load greater than the body weight of the average man. Unlike the hot landing experienced by their sister company, Lima Company found a scene of tranquillity. Sapper Jay McIntosh of 25 Commando Field Squadron, Royal Engineers recalled the sense of dislocation of the heliborne insertion:

‘Within a minute of boarding the Chinook we were airborne, the chopping of the blades drowning out the few words that were spoken. I looked out of the window as day broke at the vast landscape and minutes later we touched down in unfamiliar surroundings, dismounted the aircraft in tandem and set up a textbook all-round defence. As the Chinooks disappeared into the distance I took time to look around and saw Danish tanks up on the hill ahead of me looking into the area held by the enemy. As we waited, we stayed focussed, watching our arcs and ready to react in an instant. We were accompanied only by the tweeting of birds, which seemed strange but pleasant given the circumstances.’

This sudden serenity was a feature that struck many soldiers tipped into the Green Zone from the noisy bellies of the Chinooks.

Burdened like donkeys – a nickname that the Taliban used for British soldiers – the commandos then yomped across the desert to the edge of the target area. McIntosh and his fellow sappers were needed because Objective Silver was located behind a canal which would have to be crossed by laying an infantry bridge. The sections of this bridge were manhandled by the sappers and the bridge was quickly erected:

‘We eventually started patrolling forward, toward an infantry assault bridge which was to be our method of crossing the canal to get to the compounds we were to assault. I admit the speed with which the bridge had been put up surprised me, and I was at the rehearsals! As we approached the bridge, rounds started coming in, landing at my feet and whistling past my head, that’s when the section took better cover behind a raised mound, which I’m still thankful for. Despite the Taliban not being the best shots, there were too many rounds to dodge. We crossed the everlasting bridge one by one, I could feel it wobbling as I held on to the rails and kept my head down.’

Once over the bridge the marines had to force entry into the suspect compound. McIntosh carried the charges: barmines especially adapted to blow holes in the thick compound walls. The sappers relished the work, not just because it gave them an excuse to blow things up, but also because it reduced their load:

‘On the other side we found further cover and moved towards a compound before assessing how to enter it. We avoided the door because of the risk of IEDs and placed a half-barmine on the outer wall, blowing an entrance which allowed the Commandos to invade and engage the enemy. Before resting we had to blow some ‘murder holes’ in the walls with PE4 to allow the Commandos to observe and fire from the compound.’

While Lima Company was assaulting Objective Silver, the Brigade Reconnaissance Force had been landed directly on Objective Platinum to achieve maximum surprise. A measure of the resistance they met can be gauged from the fact that by the following morning they were still fighting from a compound just 300 metres from where they had been landed.[773] Kilo Company in the meantime had secured a canal crossing point north of the objectives which would be used to resupply the marines. With Silver cleared, Lima Company then proceeded to a major track junction – Objective Brass – to block the movement of fleeing gunmen, as well as to deter any fighters intent on reinforcing from the west in Marjah District. This carefully orchestrated manoeuvre was covered by the Danish Leopards that laid down accurate fire on dug-in enemy positions. It was a model assault that left the insurgents 'surprised and confused'. A heavy expenditure of Hellfire missiles and several 2,000 pound bombs also helped.

By dusk, Lima Company had moved south to a school that was suspected to be an IED factory. The closing of schools and the conversion of these into insurgent bases, on the assumption that ISAF would not attack school buildings, was a common, cynical and mistaken Taliban tactic. The marines pummelled the building, as McIntosh recalled: 'The most impressive display of firepower I had ever seen as the Taliban were forced out and we moved in.' The intelligence in this case had been accurate. Inside the now damaged building the commandos found pressure plates and other IED components as well as Taliban 'ATM cards' – the inevitable ten kilogram bags of opium. The following morning, fighters attempted to counter-attack the marines but were met by a volley of mortars, Javelin missiles and machine gun fire.

Operations like Aabi Toorah did not have lasting effects. After three days of almost continuous gun battles the insurgents melted away but they would recover, make good their material and human losses, and reassert control of Trikh Nawa. The fault lay not in the idea but in the numbers. Operation Aabi Toorah had been based on sound intelligence and the marines had faultlessly executed an imaginative plan. But they could not simultaneously wage this form of mobile warfare and man the dozens of British patrol bases that had sprung up in the last two years. When 3 Commando Brigade arrived in the autumn they inherited thirty-eight bases, the majority manned by no more than a platoon of soldiers. They left only adding another four to the total. Over the course of the war and the three tours undertaken by 3 Commando Brigade, the marines contributed around twenty-six of the roughly 200 patrol bases and check points built by the British. It was the Army that was obsessed with holding ground and which sacrificed mobility for static

warfare, not the Royal Marines who appeared instinctively to understand the importance of mobility and agility.

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Mobile operations of this type had to be conducted on a weekly basis, relentlessly and without respite – as General Challe fought the second half of the Algerian War – wearing down the insurgency by never allowing the insurgents to rest or feel safe, anywhere. Eventually the British did follow this course in the form of 'targeting operations', involving both special forces and the task force. 'Mowing the lawn' had its critics, but in part it was self-defeating not because it was an essentially flawed strategy, but because the British were not doing it enough, or ruthlessly. In Algeria, to invoke the comparison again, the French raised two airmobile *divisions* and built up a force of several hundred helicopters. The British were trying to mount mobile operations with single companies and three or four helicopters. More troops and more helicopters would have been required to pursue a decisive mobile campaign and neither was forthcoming. Static, attrition warfare was always likely to be the order of the day.

Before the British handed over responsibility for southern Helmand to US marines there would be one last swipe at the Taliban. Operation Kapcha Baz ('Cobra Eagle') was mounted at the beginning of March in the area nicknamed 'the Snake's Belly' from the shape of the meander in the Helmand River. Insurgent gangs displaced from Darvishan had re-grouped further south and continued to make forays north. This was also a Baluchi smuggling corridor. From north to south, a string of Ishaqzai and Alizai villages on the east bank of the Helmand offered sanctuary and rest for smugglers and insurgents alike. For Lieutenant Colonel Alan Richmond and his cavalrymen who had spent the entire six months holding the line this was a last opportunity to sally out from the defensive cordon at Darvishan.

Richmond managed to collect almost 400 troops for Operation Kapcha Baz. Sub-units involved included the Brigade Reconnaissance Force, A Squadron QDG mounted in Scimitars, D Company from 2 RGR, and B Company from 1 Rifles that was acting as mentors for an under-strength ANA kandak. The intelligence for the operation had in part been gleaned by these ANA soldiers patrolling the bazaars, an example of the usefulness of local knowledge. Four objectives were designated for the operation. To the north, Objectives Wolf and Vixen marked a crossroads between two settlements that the Taliban appeared to be using as a rendezvous point. About fifteen kilometres further south were Objectives Coyote and Dingo, a village and bazaar area.

On 7 March, the Brigade Reconnaissance Force and A Squadron QDG made a stealthy march south and found lie-up positions east of Objectives Coyote and Vixen respectively, on high ground. Despite British efforts to achieve surprise, dust and noise probably gave away these preparatory moves as the insurgents appeared to know that something was afoot when D Company 2 RGR arrived the following day aboard three Chinooks. The Gurkhas, led by a Major Jody Davies, had the task of clearing Objective Wolf, the northernmost objective. As the riflemen advanced, ICOM intercepts warned them that the Taliban were preparing to set up an ambush and it was not long before these preparations were spotted. A GMLRS strike was called and this seemed to provoke a 'maelstrom of fire'. The Gurkhas responded with machine gun fire, augmented by fire support from the Jackals crewed by A Squadron. Eventually a suspected bunker position was neutralised by an air strike which seemed to break the back of the resistance, allowing the Gurkhas to advance into the village. At the southern end of the village - at Objective Vixen - the ANA and their 1 Rifles mentors made a land grab meeting only desultory fire. As they fled, the Taliban set fire to a number of shops in the bazaar, it was suspected, to discredit ISAF. A total of six shops burned down before the Gurkhas were able put out the flames. After the commotion had settled down, a shura was held with the locals. As almost everyone in the Snake's Belly was directly or indirectly involved in illicit trades, the locals had little incentive to co-operate with the soldiers that had suddenly descended on their village, causing damage to the bazaar.

In the meantime, the Brigade Reconnaissance Force further south kept track of 'squirters' – or Taliban escaping the area in pick-ups or motorcycles – in the vicinity of Objectives Coyote and Dixon. The marines spotted a number of suspicious movements but were unable to intercept these because of the distances involved and broken ground. This marked the end of the fighting phase of Operation Kapcha Baz. Over the next forty-eight hours the battlegroup visited two further villages in the Snake's Belly and held shuras before withdrawing back to Darvishan. For the British, it was now time to start packing and preparing for the hand-over. For the tribesmen it was time to bring in the opium poppy harvest. The fighting was temporarily suspended. It was a moment for reflection.

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The winter had not witnessed the traditional Afghan lull in hostilities. In total, the brigade suffered one more fatality than the paratroopers in the summer – the first tour in which the winter fatality total had exceeded the summer total. Two Conspicuous Gallantry Crosses and fourteen Military Crosses would be awarded to the brigade. As in the

previous three years, many of these gallantry awards were won by marines and soldiers trying to save stricken comrades under fire. Typical of these was Marine Samuel Alexander, a machine gunner who ran out of ammunition for his GPMG, pulled out a pistol, and continued to engage the Taliban at close range, thus allowing the safe extraction of a casualty. One of the more unusual acts of bravery was carried out by Sergeant Noel Connolly who was alert enough to spot a would-be suicide bomber and courageous enough to rugby tackle the assailant. Able Seaman Class 1 Kate Nesbitt became the first Royal Naval recipient of the Military Cross (and the first ever female recipient) since the Second World War.

Operation Herrick 9 marked an important milestone in the war. 3 Commando Brigade's second deployment to Helmand would prove to be the limit of British expansion and ambition. Marines had fought from Kajaki in the far north to the dwindling course of the Helmand River in the far south. Commandos had roamed across Uruzgan, Kandahar and Helmand provinces. In the spring the Americans would be arriving and the British area of responsibility would naturally contract. At this juncture, it was worth posing the question: what had been achieved?

After three years of fighting, the British desperately wanted and needed to believe that their presence in Helmand was making a difference for the better. Inevitably, there were Panglossian voices that viewed events in the province in the best possible light. An example of this wishful reporting, below, showed just how far some views were from the reality of Helmand:

'With the ANA brigade commander this afternoon I met a gathering of Nad e Ali elders… There was absolutely no doubt in the minds of these village elders that the actions of the ANA and their OMLT mentors had made a profound difference to the area and their lives. With the greater security provided, normal life has resumed to some extent and these wise, bearded men were obviously deeply grateful for the combined efforts of the Afghan and British soldiers. And similar effects and gratitude have been observed and reported elsewhere, of course.' [774]

This was, unfortunately, rose-tinted nonsense. The only certain 'of course' in Nad-e Ali was that the fighting was far from over.

If this officer was seeing peace breaking out, the evidence from nationwide polling was suggesting a quite different picture. At the beginning of 2009 all polls were pointing in the wrong direction. The BBC, in conjunction with two other international broadcasters, had

annually surveyed Afghan national opinion on a range of issues. The results of the fourth such poll were dispiriting. Confidence in the security situation and the economy had diminished.The slide towards disillusion and discontent had accelerated. When the commandos last served in Helmand in 2006-07, 55 per cent of Afghans thought that the country was going in the right direction. Now only 40 per cent thought so.[775] Over half cited a lack of security as the reason for this pessimistic outlook, followed by corruption. Education, which ISAF touted as a pillar of the reconstruction effort, bothered a mere 3 per cent of Afghans. When asked whether they enjoyed security from the Taliban, 47 per cent reported that their situation was ‘somewhat or very bad’, a testament to the spread of the insurgency across Afghanistan. About the same number reported violence in their local area - for half the population, warfare was still the normal state of affairs. The popularity of insurgency, despite its geographical expansion, remained rock bottom - just 4 per cent of Afghans wanted a return of Taliban government. ISAF should have been running away with the war, but was still struggling to impose a coherent or decisive strategy. Part of the problem was that over a third of the population ‘strongly or somewhat opposed’ the presence of foreign soldiers in Afghanistan. This was roughly the same proportion of Afghans who responded that attacks against ISAF were justified. Regardless of whether Afghans wanted Taliban rule, millions did not want ISAF rule either. Not a few of these were prepared to take up arms to register their disapproval. Against these dispiriting numbers, there was some glimmer of hope. Despite the pessimism, Afghans seemed to see improvements in other areas of their life, however modest. It was not a small achievement that around half of respondents reported that they had seen schools, clinics, mosques, roads, government offices and police stations opened in their local area in the last five years. Real and tangible changes could no longer be denied.

Perhaps the most interesting Afghan perception was one that was never revealed by the extensive polling, conducted not just by the BBC, but by many other organisations. An undercutting irony of the war, adumbrated by Michael Martin, was that despite all the huffing and puffing of the last three years, many Helmandis believed that the British were fighting *with* the Taliban, not against them. This myth, however preposterous to a Westerner, was both durable and widely believed. Karzai repeated it and Talibs even believed it.

Many strands contributed to this view: the perfidious *angrez* (‘English’) were up to their old tricks and were trying to weaken Afghanistan by fomenting conflict; Britain’s support for Pakistan was interpreted as support for the ISI, which everybody knew was

supporting the Taliban (DfID should perhaps have taken note); British restraint was interpreted as a bargain with the Taliban; and the 'Musa Qaleh deal' was cited as incontrovertible proof that the British were in cahoots with the insurgents. This myth was not just entrenched in Helmand's villages. As Martin points out, educated Afghans also believed it, as did senators in Kabul who were highly critical of the British. When the US marines deployed to Helmand, the myth gained another chapter. Noting the differences between the two contingents, Helmandis concluded that the British and Americans were in fact conducting some sort of civil war between themselves, with the Taliban fighting on the British side. Laughing off such conspiracy theories is inadequate: they speak of a profound failure of ISAF to get its message across, as well as a failure to pursue a strategy that made any sense to ordinary Afghans.

Brigadier Messenger, unlike his predecessor, saw some hope in these mixed messages. The strategy of clear-hold-build was working. It just needed more time and probably more troops. As by this stage the British really had no option left but to follow this strategy to which they had committed all their resources, it was perhaps unsurprising that Brigadier Messenger felt obliged to offer an upbeat assessment. To do otherwise would have been akin to the Allies conceding that the costly march up the spine of Italy was serving little purpose in the defeat of Nazi Germany and ought to be abandoned for a different strategy. Messenger was clear, however, that this strategy should not be an excuse for the British to take ownership of the string of bases springing up all over the province. The task force could not have done so, even if it had wanted to, because there were insufficient troops. The key was Afghan ownership – the same point made by Ed Butler, the first commander in Helmand, and reiterated by every successive brigade commander. The Afghans had to be prodded, cajoled and coached into taking charge of the war. The problem was that after three years of mentoring, the ANA in Helmand was no nearer to standing on its feet without ISAF assistance. The fault for this lay on both sides: the British had become distracted by the more compelling draw of fighting the Taliban (the mentoring role was seen as a second class job); and the Afghans had been slow to awaken to the reality that the ISAF milk cow was not going to allow her teats to be suckled for ever. The war would have to wait until the arrival of General McChrystal who would transform mentoring into more meaningful and durable partnering. Other factors, such as the steep rise in British casualties after the marines departed in the spring of 2009, as well as the fast-approaching British general election, also served to sharpen the British strategy.

The covert special force campaign was another aspect of the war which needed better coordination, intelligence and tempo. When the first British special force unit deployed to

Helmand – a squadron of the SBS – it was taken under the wing of the American Task Force Aegis already operating in the area. The British had no infrastructure – and crucially no intelligence – that would have allowed them to operate independently of the Americans. Task Force Aegis had already earned a reputation for causing trouble and the British were soon sucked into this trouble (losing two lives very early in the war). Later the British would establish their own special force bases at Camp Juno, as well as maintaining enclosures at Kandahar and Kabul.

The real problem with British special force operations was threefold. First, co-ordination with the wider campaign remained poor. There is little or no evidence the British special force contingent was directly supporting any of Task Force Helmand's major operations. Instead, it appears the task force had to rely on American special forces to assist them. Setting up enclaves apart from the task force was hardly an incentive to close cooperation. There was a sense that the special force contingent did not feel that it was part of the army, but rather belonged to its own, introverted world. Rather than fighting a unified and integrated campaign, the British appeared to be fighting two, and one of the parties seemed to be keeping the other at arm's length. Second, this geographical separation was compounded by an electronic separation. The lack of an adequate British communications infrastructure affected everyone and was only resolved in the second half of the war. Acutely, the transmission of classified information was limited. The key to successful intelligence management is unity and fusion, and this was not happening. The British knew this, or should have. If you had joined the Army thirty years previously, and had attended the intelligence officers' course, you would have been taught '…there should be a single, centralized and integrated intelligence organization controlled either by a specially appointed Director of Intelligence or the senior intelligence officer in the area of operations'.[776] Task Force Helmand never appointed a Director of Intelligence, or indeed a Campaign Director to take charge and responsibility for the war. The British did know how to do counter-insurgency – in Malaya, Kenya, Oman and elsewhere. Over the years, these hard-won lessons from Britain's 'small wars' had been forgotten.

The last problem was the tempo – it was slow. The British special force contingent was not arresting or killing enough Taliban at a quick enough rate to make any measurable impact on the war. ISAF reporting – somewhat coy about special force operations – suggested that the British were probably 'taking down' a target every 3-4 weeks. Typical of this reporting were opaque press releases:

‘KABUL, Afghanistan - It has been confirmed this morning that a senior Taliban commander was killed by ISAF forces during a targeted operation in Southern Helmand Nov. 19. Mullah Asad died as a result of a successful operation by ISAF forces. Asad was a senior Taliban Operational Commander for Southern Helmand and was linked to numerous attacks in the Garmsir district. He also facilitated attacks against the Afghan Security Forces. His death comes three weeks after another senior commander in Garmsir Province, Mullah Mashar, was killed during a similar operation.’[777]

To make a difference to the war, this style of targeting operation had to be undertaken every 3-4 days, not weeks. Even so, when the tempo was finally racked up during the McChrystal period, questions still hung over the impact of the special force war.

Most critically, these operations had to be coordinated with the main efforts of the conventional campaign. The successes that were reported masked the apparent continuing problems of co-ordination between the special force units and conventional, national forces, as well as ISAF allies. The marines’ relationship with the American Task Force 71 was haphazard at best. It improved when Task Force 31 took over at the turn of the year but there still appeared to be a prejudice within the special force community that there were really two wars taking place in Helmand.

Poor intelligence management continued to be a hindrance to coherent operations (as it had been in the Northern Ireland, but the lessons again appeared to have been forgotten). The marines found the lack of a central intelligence database ‘staggering’. The entire process of collating, fusing and disseminating intelligence was judged ‘critically flawed’. Individuals kept information in their heads which was lost when they departed from the province. Archived databases fifteen folders deep were found making it quite impossible for anyone without intimate knowledge of the database to actually find a piece of information in any reasonable time. There were no or few Intelligence Corps soldiers on the front lines (where the majority of useful intelligence was actually being generated by the marines themselves) and there were no electronic means of passing classified intelligence to front line companies from the brigade headquarters. An understanding of Helmand’s political and tribal dynamics remained poor. The failure of the intelligence community to galvanize itself would be criticised following Operation Telic in the Barry Report.[778] This finally seemed to jolt the intelligence community out of its complacency, but three years of opportunities had been lost by this stage.

Attrition also continued to be a problem. The brigade suffered over 60 per cent of its casualties as a result of IEDs yet roadside bombs had been comparatively few. What

would be the effect if the Taliban began laying these devices in earnest, in belts, or in ‘IED fields’? The answer would come later that year. Even without the threat of IEDs, the drain on manpower was debilitating. In total the brigade would lose 379 soldiers to disease and non-battlefield injury, a loss rate it could not make up because there was no battle casualty replacement system. The marines had tried to wrest the initiative from the insurgents but like the paratroopers before them, they reckoned that nine out of ten gun fights were started by the enemy.

The uneven and in some respects non-existent ‘comprehensive approach’ appeared to be entrenching itself more meaningfully in the British strategy. But it was slow – far too slow and too modest. 3 Commando Brigade managed to initiate and in part complete around sixty reconstruction projects, committing just under $8 million to these tasks. This was the best record to date of any of the British brigades. Overall, the British task force had committed in the order of $20 million to reconstruction in its three years in Helmand Province.[779] This was less than the bill for bottled water at Camp Bastion and astronomically less than the cost of a month’s worth of expended ammunition. The dollars, to use the phrase, were still chasing the bullets. The PRT expanded again but the addition of extra personnel seemed to add bureaucracy, slowing down reconstruction still further. The advent of Military Support Stabilisation Teams (MSSTs), based at front line locations, would add some teeth to an operation that was really only scratching the surface of the problem.

An example of the work undertaken by soldiers can be drawn from the experiences of Warrant Officer Second Class Ben Fouracre (24 Commando Engineer Regiment), who led a Construction and Supervision Team at Garmsir. Fouracre had three big jobs on his books: refurbishing the District Centre Hospital, a large, rural clinic which on occasions received as many as 200 patients a day; refurbishing the local school; and refurbishing the governor’s house and offices. This last task was one which the British routinely undertook in the hope that the flattered and grateful governors would repay the British with loyalty, if not honesty. These hopes were not uncommonly dashed (a common scam was ‘losing’ generators and requesting replacements from the British). Another seven projects were in the pipeline including the clean-up of the trashed bazaar which had already been transformed by the provision of thirty-six solar street lights. The twin challenges Fouracre faced were securing funds from the system, in the first instance, and preventing the dissipation of these funds through corruption:

‘There is a lack of finances to get the tasks started which is frustrating and there is also

speculation of corruption which doesn't help things.'[780]

The Commanding Officer of 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery could not help but notice how little had changed in some areas:

'It was also rather depressing to see how little progress has been made since we left this town [Now Zad] 19 months ago. It remains a completely deserted and war torn location, surrounded by stunning mountains and perilous mine fields – not to mention an enemy seemingly content to maintain the stalemate.'

The British were not just committing insufficient funds to reconstruction, they were, as Ben Fouracre complained, releasing these funds with an incomprehensible miserliness. Form-filling (to get approval for a project and therefore the release of funds) could strain credulity. DfID 'box-ticking' included such questions as: how will the project promote understanding across ethnic, religious and social divides? How will women play a part in the implementation of the project? Is the project environmentally friendly? Never mind that Helmand's farmers represented a near-Biblical, misogynistic lot as far from idealistic Western millennium goals as Earth was from Pluto. Did the proposed project agree with the priorities set by the local authorities and lead humanitarian agency? This may have been a relevant question to ask, if there had been recognisable, corrupt-free, local authorities, and if all the humanitarian agencies had not abandoned south-west Afghanistan three years previously. The same frustrations were also evident in counter-narcotics which continued to be an embarrassing failure. A reported 32,000 farmers had received wheat seeds and fertilizers under the very over-sold governor's wheat seed program. It made not an iota of difference to the opium poppy crop. A proportion was simply stolen, and farmers continued to respond to market signals not ISAF hand-me-outs.

As 3 Commando Brigade prepared to leave Helmand dust clouds on the horizon signalled the arrival of American forces. These conventional military forces represented only a proportion of armed Americans and other nationalities in Afghanistan as a significant slice of reconstruction budgets was simply being swallowed up by security companies. Eight years after the start of Operation Enduring Freedom there were thirty-nine registered private security companies operating in Afghanistan. The number of security contractors employed by the Department of Defense alone amounted to nearly 60 per cent of the entire British military task force. If the total number of legal and illegal security personnel had been calculable, the number would certainly have exceeded the British military contribution to ISAF by some margin. Nobody really knew with precision how many security personnel were being employed in Afghanistan because the country

was awash with arms and anyone with money and a sufficiently vulnerable profile employed armed security guards. One source reckoned that between 10-20 per cent of the reconstruction budget was going straight into the pockets of the security firms.[781] One Afghan government official calculated that funding of foreign security firms amounted to three times the salaries of the fledgling Afghan army and police combined.[782] Working in an often lawless environment, and fuelled by boredom and alcohol, the private security firms soon developed a poor reputation. There were incidents of ill-discipline and allegations of illegal 'black ops' and interrogations. These activities – verified or not – created suspicion amongst Afghan hosts who increasingly viewed Westerners as lawless and gun-toting (a rich irony, it may be noted).

Westerners working on the fringes of the law were not the only headache. Contracts were granted to ex-warlords and local bullies who effectively became paid mercenaries of ISAF. The Australians in Uruzgan were sustaining a 2,000 strong paramilitary force; the Canadians in Kandahar were employing a local crook to guard camps; and in the German area of responsibility a known opium baron was being funded by ISAF to provide an armed security force.[783] The fickleness of these militias was laid bare when a score of Afghan security contractors rode out of a US special force base to 'rescue' one of their comrades who had been arrested by the Afghan police. In the ensuing gun battle (inside the police HQ in Kandahar city), they killed the provincial police chief and several policemen.

The employment of private security firms was just the tip of a very large contractor iceberg which was turning Afghanistan into a lucrative market just as operations in Iraq were beginning to wind down. By 2009, and for the first time in the US Army's history, more civilians were being employed in a theatre of war than soldiers (68,197 contractors versus 52,300 soldiers).[784] By the following year, with the 'Obama surge', the disparity would grow. In fact, Department of Defense civilian employees exceeded the entire military contribution of the other forty-one nations in ISAF – an indication of how this was an American war and how little the European allies were contributing to the war effort. As the winter of 2009 thawed, giving way to another Afghan spring, the imbalance between America and her allies was about to tell, but in positive ways. The Messiah was on his way.

CHAPTER 10
CRISIS YEAR
Operation HERRICK 10
10 April 2009 – October 2009

At the beginning of 2009 *The Economist* ran a feature on the state of the British Army. The leader was entitled 'Overstretched, overwhelmed and over there'.[785] The journal warned that Britain's penny-pinching governments had run down the armed forces, while faced with a need to keep pace with the American-led operation in Afghanistan. However, this was not a time to give up:

'Abandoning Afghanistan, leaving a vacuum for the Taliban to fill, would mean a victory for extremism everywhere, a destabilized Pakistan and a less safe world. Losing today's war could make tomorrow's wars more likely.'

The problems facing the pressed MOD were many. Over the years, British governments had systematically under-funded the armed forces. Large, technologically-glitzy projects had soaked up funds required for equipment to fight today's wars. British confidence over 'how to do small wars' had turned to hubris. The withdrawal from Basra had been a humiliation, saved by American intervention in the subsequent Iraqi operation to retake the city, Operation Charge of the Knights. Worryingly, *The Economist* reported, senior American commanders were voicing a lack of confidence in the British. The following year, embarrassing disclosures on the controversial website Wikileaks would reveal the depth of this American disquiet. The British themselves seemed drained of confidence.

This public pessimism over the conduct of the war was reflected in discourse in military periodicals. An article published in the spring of 2009 in the US Army's house magazine, captured the new mood, quite devoid of the triumphalism that had marked the early years of the Bush presidency.[786] Quoting the Defense Secretary, the article asserted:

'If our goal is to create some sort of Asian Valhalla, we will lose. Nobody has the time,

the patience or the money to do that…We need more concrete goals that can be achieved realistically within three to five years.'

This was a candid admission that the new Obama administration was already looking to the next presidential election – in a country where the election race starts the day after the inauguration of the winning candidate from the last election – and the new president had no intention of throwing away his handsome advantage by pursuing an interminable war in a central Asian country. It was also an admission that America's post-credit crunch purse was finite (notwithstanding, by withdrawal in 2014, US aid to Afghanistan had exceeded the entire Marshall Plan, and significantly exceeded aid to South Vietnam). The article instead focused on the many failures besetting the war. There had been insufficient troops which had allowed the Taliban to dominate large swathes of the country. Despite the growing consensus that more troops were needed, the Defense Secretary remained sceptical that reinforcements, beyond the 30,000 soldiers that would be sent after months of lobbying by General McKiernan, would make a great difference. Roadside bombs (3,276 in the previous year) were continuing to cause attrition. Supply lines from Pakistan were being attacked. A plan to create village militias had stalled. President Karzai's power did not extend beyond Kabul and the licit economy was 'practically nonexistent'. Dennis Steele, the staff writer, concluded gloomily that after eight years of fighting and the expenditure of billions of dollars, Operation Enduring Freedom had only brought Afghanistan 'to within sight of a starting point'. It is difficult to imagine such an honest article would have been permitted in the British Army's equivalent magazine.

Certainly there was an overwhelming sense that the war had become beleaguered at the beginning of 2009 and that some radical changes needed to be implemented. The inauguration of the new American president – America's first black incumbent of the White House - had been accompanied by a wave of semi-hysterical, global adulation. The new commander-in-chief had promised to make Afghanistan a top priority. His advisors, unaffected by the election hoopla, remained lugubrious and short on inspiration. The redoubtable Richard Holbrook, who had faced off Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic and was no stranger to intractable conflicts candidly admitted: 'I have never seen anything like the mess we have inherited'. As if to underline the mess, he began using the term 'the Afpak War' – not to save syllables he told a European audience at a security conference in Munich – but because this is what it had become, a wider cross-border war encompassing two unstable, Muslim countries. His counterpart in the Defense Department, Robert Gates,

a dutiful servant of the previous Republican administration who agreed to stay in post under new masters, was equally pessimistic. America should no longer seek to rebuild the derelict that Afghanistan had become after a quarter of a century of fighting. Rather, it should set out to beat its real enemy – al-Qaeda – while maintaining more modest aims in reconstruction and development. European NATO allies plainly had to do more. America could not and ultimately would not pull the cart alone.

In Britain, the new realism was captured by Foreign Secretary David Miliband. With refreshing honesty, Miliband conceded the Taliban had fought ISAF to a standstill. A new strategy – and crucially new civilian heads of mission - had to be found to reinvigorate Britain's floundering engagement in Afghanistan. The British ambassador in Kabul, Sherard Cowper-Coles, who himself had been appointed to give the operation more clout, had suffered uneven relations with British military commanders in Helmand, and had reportedly lost the confidence of the American ambassador in Kabul (which was easily lost, as Karl Eikenberry cast a long and critical shadow over much of the ISAF operation). Cowper-Coles was appointed special envoy to the region, working alongside the American special envoy Richard Holbrooke. This was a sideways promotion which unfortunately cast the British diplomat in a worse light. Compared to the pugilistic Holbrooke, Cowper-Coles seemed too obviously 'British' – a character suited to effete social intercourse but not hard negotiations with Pakistan's generals. Within a year Cowper-Coles would resign, it was suspected, driven out by a private sense that the war was failing, as well as frustration that his path to the top of the FCO had been thwarted.

Giving Cowper-Coles a fair hearing was hard because he was, in many ways, his own worst enemy. He had been one of few British ambassadors unwise enough to publish a personal blog. A typical entry – '(Sherard) Hi, this is another instalment of the Foreign Office blog. I am with President Karzai of Afghanistan on an official visit to Britain. He has been at Balmoral with His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales, he has an audience with Her Majesty The Queen this afternoon and is seeing the Prime Minister tomorrow…' – came across as vulgar name-dropping and left the reader no wiser over how British foreign policy was addressing Afghanistan's multifarious and intractable problems.[787] This penchant for tittle-tattle re-emerged in later years in his autobiography, *Ever the Diplomat*, a book that offered plenty of gossip, but offered little to a student of British foreign policy over the last thirty years. The Israelis remembered him as an ambassador who would turn up at meetings pretentiously wearing a bowler hat and carrying an umbrella. The journalist Robert Fisk, a keen observer of Westerners who have processed

through the Middle East, offered a less than flattering portrait of the former ambassador. [788] His easing out of Kabul unblocked a channel which the British needed to open to restore impetus to the flagging ISAF campaign. A former Islamabad diplomat, Mark Sedwill, replaced him. The energetic Mark Sedwill would eventually assume the role of senior ISAF civilian representative in Afghanistan. This was the post the former Liberal-Democrat party leader and NATO special envoy to the Balkans, Paddy Ashdown, might have occupied at the beginning of the war, had the appointment not been thwarted by the ever-suspicious Karzai. Sedwill could hardly have been phlegmatic about his new appointment. Support for the British had been steadily declining since the intervention: a stunningly low 6 per cent of Afghans thought that the British were doing a good job in Afghanistan.[789] This was a level of ingratitude not seen since the Korean War when President Rhee suggested the British contingent should quit the country.

Another stalemated fighting season had brought the West's strained relations with President Karzai to the fore. This was election year in Afghanistan and the prospect of another Karzai term in the presidency filled Western politicians with foreboding. The most important of these relations was that between the US State Department and President Karzai, and this was at an all time low. The new Secretary of State Hillary Clinton openly described Afghanistan as a narco-state. Vice-President Joe Biden walked out of a state dinner. Richard Holbrooke, predictably, had a blazing row with the Afghan president, soon after taking up his appointment. Everywhere there was evidence that the American-Afghan relationship was fraying, perhaps beyond repair.

There was a long list of grievances against Karzai, chief of which was that he was presiding over a corrupt and inefficient government. According to the World Bank, Afghanistan has been in the top 2 per cent of the most corrupt countries in the world every year between 2002 and 2006. Karzai, for his part, had become paranoid about the West's intentions, seeing plots to unseat him at every corner. To appear strong to the Afghan electorate he had fallen into the habit of routinely blaming ISAF for military failures, and in particular for air strikes that resulted in civilian casualties. This, as General McKiernan would delicately point out, commonly amounted to naked hypocrisy. In many instances it was Afghans urging American air controllers to attack targets – against ISAF's highly restrictive Rules of Engagement – that led to incidents of collateral damage. When the dust settled after such incidents the Americans naturally took the blame and paid compensation. Afghans, motivated by inter-tribal politics and manifesting an indifference to the loss of civilian lives, escaped criticism.

The use of air power was one of the more controversial aspects of the war and one that inevitably generated fallacies and myths. The first myth was that ISAF air strikes were greatly resented by Afghans and this represented one of the principal reasons why Western forces were losing the war. This was an over-stated argument that did not accord with experience on the ground. The majority of rural Afghans viewed accidental killings by ISAF air strikes much like acts of god. In a few well-reported cases anger spilled over into protest and anti-ISAF violence but in most cases the principal concern was securing 'blood money' or compensation payments. It would have been patronizing to deny illiterate Afghans the emotions of loss and bereavement but equally an unsentimental eye might have acknowledged that life in rural Afghanistan was nasty, brutish and short. Afghans were used to the rituals and fortunes of war and stoical in the face of sudden adversity. In the same way that a British wartime generation would not have sought pity or even understood the notion of 'collateral damage' – a post-war euphemism that has become a bone fought over by military spokesmen and a critical media – so rural Afghans did not share in the casuistry that surrounded Western debate over air power and its unarguable capacity to flatten homes and steal lives.

The second myth was that ISAF was *inherently* a clumsy giant, killing civilians with indiscriminate bombing. This was driven not by Afghans (or even by Arab television stations like Al-Jazeera, or Al-Arabiya) but by Western media. This raised questions over the relationship between the media and the armed forces of democratic countries which had been festering for over a generation.

Vietnam was the war that soured this relationship. It was during this conflict that an American press turned against its own air force pilots, particularly in the second half of the war when the misadventure unraveled. Henry Kissinger – a popular villain of America's confused and *restrained* air war in Vietnam – memorably recalled in his memoirs the barrage of outraged headlines following the Christmas 1972 bombing campaign, an operation that was embarked upon with great reluctance and after much prevarication.[790] In the wake of these air strikes the Swedish government openly accused the White House of behaving like Nazis, and the most restrained domestic headline which the Nixon administration had to weather was 'New Madness in Vietnam' (from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*). Most broadsheets wrote luridly about 'rains of death', 'terror in the skies', and 'untold horrors'. The civilian casualties from the bombing were greatly exaggerated and none of the critics offered an alternative credible strategy that would have forced the hugely frustrating North Vietnamese delegation to settle. As Kissinger wryly

noted, he received a barrage of bitter letters from critics over the Christmas bombings. One month later, when Hanoi capitulated, 'none of them wrote to me…'

American media hostility towards its own armed forces (or to that bogey of Sixties liberal intelligentsia, the Pentagon) was never going to last. Americans were far too patriotic to over-indulge in what historian Paul Johnson termed 'America's suicide attempt' in Vietnam. This war was neither swept under the national carpet – thousands of books were written, most critical – nor was it used to dismantle or down-size the great North American military-industrial complex (although some tried). America rebounded, first under the sunny President Reagan and later under a former Second World War naval aviator, President Bush Senior. Nor was American fascination with military technological progress in any way diminished by its bitter experience in Indochina. The opposite happened. Defence research and development has always been at the leading edge of human inventiveness and the roots of America's overwhelming military dominance by the end of the 20th century lay in the lessons learned from the Vietnam War. Doing better was America's manifest destiny. By the time the combined air forces of the United States routed the Iraqi regime in the first Gulf War (a mere sixteen years separated America's humiliating withdrawal from Saigon and Operation Desert Storm), America's media outlets were cheerleading from the stands. This was how war should be.

European media, generally, did not see it this way. American military power might have saved Europe, once from itself, and a second time from the encroachment of the Soviet Union, but it had now become an out-of-control Gulliver to the European Lilliputians. These Europeans opinion-makers – a mix of left wing and liberal voices - now defined themselves in permanent opposition to American military action, and especially to American air power which had become, to use the popular American phrase, awesome - or perhaps just fearsome.

Typical of this body of European opinion was the work of British journalists like Robert Fisk. Fisk's indignation at the follies and cruelties of warfare – experienced at first hand in Middle Eastern wars – produced some of the best war journalism of the second half of the 20th century. His magisterial *The Great War for Civilization*, a long meditation on a lifetime bearing witness to the sufferings of civilians in Middle Eastern wars, was difficult to surpass. What caused friction was not the indignation and protest – these were the natural responses of any civilized person – but rather the illogical and unrealistic conclusions that this reporting genre encouraged. Any military action was by default 'bad'; there was no such thing as human error, only conspiracies to cover up the killing of

civilians; there was no such thing as a technical failure, a precision bomb should always work perfectly (much like a live television link it would have been tempting to point out). The clichés of this reporting – the stray bomb, imagined NATO dissimulation, alleged war crimes, the automatic view that any Western military campaign was somehow 'wrong' – became leaden and intellectually casual. Each war was different but the same anti-war template and arguments were applied regardless of the circumstances of the conflict. European journalism that presented itself as a bastion of sophisticated independent inquiry thus perversely became an apologist for Third World tyrants, thugs and mass murderers 'bullied' by American air power.

Mistakes were made and civilians were killed but the real story was the extreme reticence by ISAF to bomb, and the severe constraints placed on target planners and pilots alike. No outsider would ever have been allowed to witness the successive stages of a targeting cycle (for self-evident reasons, ISAF Rules of Engagement would always carry a secret classification, although the Taliban proved very quick at figuring out where the engagement parameters lay), but even the most viscerally anti-war journalist would have been amazed at the methodical fastidiousness and anxiety that preceded decisions to authorize air strikes. In total, there could be as many seventeen steps (authorizations and confirmations) before a bomb could be dropped. The professionalism and seriousness of military targeting boards and pilots was a feature of the war that was simply never reported. In the year the British task force deployed to Helmand ISAF air forces mounted 11,528 close air support missions.[791] As the fighting intensified this number rose to just over 19,000 missions. But even at the peak in 2008, just 1,170 of the 19,000 missions actually dropped ordnance.[792] Over the succeeding years, the numbers were 7.4 per cent of missions (2009); 7.6 per cent (2010); 7.8 per cent (2011); and 6.8 per cent (2012).[793] After 2012, air strikes dropped away steeply. Overall, around 93 per cent of ISAF strike sorties were electing *not* to drop ordnance rather than risk causing civilian casualties. This statistic never entered the canon of articles condemning ISAF's use of air power in Afghanistan.

The third popular myth was that ISAF had to rely on air power to make up for its lack of ground troops. Again, openly published statistics disproved this argument but journalists never made use of these figures. The tonnage of high explosives expended from aerial platforms, over the course of the war, was remarkably small. At the height of 3 Para's battles in the summer of 2006, ISAF aircraft dropped a mere 350 tons of bombs in support of ground operations *throughout* Afghanistan. Two years later when the sister

battalion 2 Para found itself fighting over the same ground against a resurgent Taliban, about 250 tons of bombs were dropped. These numbers would have barely registered in the daily bombing raids of the Second World War. A year's worth of aerial attacks in Afghanistan was not even matching half the tonnage dropped on a single night on Coventry in 1940. In the first seven years of Operation Enduring Freedom, coalition bomb expenditure amounted to less than one per cent of the bombs dropped on the Axis countries during the former war. The contrast with the Vietnam War was even more telling. When President Obama entered the White House, ISAF's high explosive tonnage expenditure amounted to just 0.2 per cent of the Vietnam total. For the remainder of his presidency it declined steeply. This was not the conduct of war from the air – as the allegation was sometimes made - but rather the conduct of a war without the massive weight of air support that Western armies had become accustomed to since the Second World War. Perhaps most remarkably of all, much less than one per cent of air strikes were causing civilian casualties – a figure that would have seemed unfathomable to a previous generation of bomber pilots. This was a fantastic achievement of pilot skill combined with (largely American) technology that never received the praise it deserved. It must be remembered the pilots were not trying to strike an enemy that looked anything like a traditional enemy. They were trying to hit fleeting enemy dressed as civilians, in civilian vehicles, and who deliberately hid within a civilian population.

The principal reason why ISAF placed in many respects crippling self-restraints on its use of air power was because air strikes had become a political issue. Every air strike that went wrong was cynically exploited by President Karzai (who never visited the sites of such attacks, unlike American senior commanders who were prepared to face the anger of relatives in person), to score points against ISAF. It is undeniable that Karzai was emotionally stirred by these mistaken attacks. But so was everybody else, especially the pilots responsible. This crude ingratitude played well to Afghan popular opinion but added another damaging rift between the Afghan president and ISAF.

This was just one of many aspects of the Karzai presidency that was causing severe friction with Western backers. The president's half-brother, Ahmed Wali, appeared to be running the volatile province of Kandahar as a personal fiefdom and there was ample anecdotal evidence to suggest he was implicated in the opium trade. Just in the last year Karzai had incensed Western public opinion by giving tacit support to legislation that effectively legalized rape in order to curry electoral favour with an ethnic minority group in northern Afghanistan. For many observers the problem was simply that Karzai was not cut for high political office. He indulged in patronage to secure his position, gave the

impression that he was uninterested in outside advice, and made private deals over a battery of mobile telephones. A majority of Afghans still supported their president but his popularity, like ISAF's, had become greatly eroded with little to show after seven years in power.

The problem for the West was that there appeared to be no credible successor or contender to Karzai. At the last election, his nearest rival, Yunus Qanouni, a Tajik who served in the Northern Alliance, had gained just 16 per cent of the vote. The baffling list of candidates and parties that had emerged since the 2004 presidential election seemed to mirror Afghanistan's wider fractious tribal complexion. Four major political umbrella organizations dominated the political scene. Potential opposition to Karzai was now headed by the National United Front of Afghanistan (UNF), an organization that included an unlikely mix of the former president Rabbani, the grandson of the last Afghan king, the warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Yunus Qanouni, the losing candidate at the last election. Thirteen other minor parties were collected under another umbrella organization calling itself the National Democratic Front (NDF). Afghanistan's former communists lived on under the banner of the Kabul Accord, and Pashtun nationalism was represented by the Afghan Mellat (Afghan Social Democratic Party). It was doubtful whether any of these Western-style political groupings meant anything to ordinary Afghans anyway as these voted on tribal lines and for personalities rather than for political parties. The list of presidential candidates was also exceedingly long with most realistically unable to gain more than one per cent of the vote.

The most credible contender was Dr Abdullah Abdullah, a half-Pashtun-Tajik who had served in the Karzai government. As a former member of the Northern Alliance and close aide to the deceased Ahmed Massoud, he could only be perceived as a Tajik Trojan horse by the Pashtun majority and therefore was unlikely to win an outright majority. Former exiles in America, the so-called' technocrats' like Ashraf Ghani and Ali Jalali, offered competence and experience but were held in little respect by the common voter. There were a handful of female candidates, like the courageous Malalai Joya, who famously lambasted her male colleagues into stunned silence on taking her parliamentary seat, and then provoked a fight on the floor. The conservative legislators - affrighted by this harridan assault on their privileged male world - duly banned her from parliament for three years, but they could not prevent her from running for the presidency. The most colourful character in the forthcoming election, unquestionably, was Mullah Rocketi, so-called because of his skill with the RPG rocket launcher in a former life. Unlike many of his peers, this former mujahidin had a genuine sense of commitment to improving the lot

of ordinary Afghans, but genuine idealists like the white-bearded former RPG man were few.

Regardless of who won the presidency there was one candidate not participating in the election who threatened, ultimately, to decide the political future of Afghanistan over the next five years. In Mullah Omar's estimation, Afghanistan's presidential candidates were a bunch of corrupt 'dog-washers' and he vowed to disrupt the election. Democracy was un-Islamic, an infidel import that was unnecessary under sharia law. The Taliban routinely made such threats but to date had failed to interrupt the fledgling Afghan democratic process. On this occasion Mullah Omar's vow would prove to be more than just the usual bombast and rhetoric.

The long-awaited reinforcement of American forces in Afghanistan brought with it an unexpected change of command. On 11 May the respected General McKiernan found himself in a position not unfamiliar to former wartime commanders – he was sacked. The sacking disappointed his staff but reportedly drew little sympathy from his civilian boss the US Defense Secretary. To outside observers the abrupt dismissal seemed unfair. McKiernan had consistently argued that ISAF, and more pointedly the United States, needed to commit more troops to the Afghan campaign. Frustrated by the previous administration which had been obsessed with a chaotic Iraq, the call for additional troops had finally been acknowledged but McKiernan would not now command these extra troops. Instead, he was going home. A general who had been his subordinate in the invasion of Iraq, General David Petraeus – the hero of America's revived fortunes in Baghdad - would assume command of CENTCOM (Central Command). His representative on the ground would be a special force general, Stanley McChrystal and his deputy would be a former commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, General David Rodriguez. To all appearances, a special forces and airborne mafia had taken over the show sidelining a diligent general who had led the campaign with inadequate forces and weak political support. For the Taliban, a change of American command was an opportunity to gloat, although the gloating would be short-lived as the American-led spring offensives began to unfold in southern Afghanistan.

It was rumoured that Karl Eikenberry, himself a former commander of American forces in Afghanistan, had played a role in the sacking because he had found working with McKiernan difficult.[794] It also appears that a whispering campaign was mounted against him in Washington. Whatever the truth in the rumours, the appointment of Stanley McChrystal was clearly not going to represent a simple change of command. McChrystal

arrived with the full weight of expectations of a new Democrat government intent on undoing the mistakes of the past and resolving the conundrum of Operation Enduring Freedom. Whatever confident public pronouncements were being made over the appointment of a new command team, it was almost certainly known in private that the McChrystal promotion represented a risk. The general was not a comfortable figure in the Washington beltway and he in turn seemed to find politicians discomfited by him. The son of a general (all four siblings served in the armed forces), it was not obvious that the younger Stanley was destined for the top. At West Point he graduated with no major and built a reputation as a rebel. His promotion was not spectacular. He took seven years to rise from captain to the next rank band and five years to rise again to lieutenant colonel. He attended the Naval War College to gain his staff qualifications rather than his own service college. Promotion to brigadier took a further eleven years. Then war entered McChrystal's life, something for which he had prepared himself assiduously with service in the 82nd Airborne Division, the Green Berets and 75th Ranger Regiment, a unit which he commanded. With the rocket fuel of battle, his ascent was meteoric. In just eight years McChrystal jumped from one star brigadier to four star general.

The American change of command was matched by a British change of command. At the end of August, Richard Dannatt handed over to David Richards, who had gained the nickname 'Kabul Richards' because of his previous experience as commander of ISAF forces in south-west Afghanistan. Richards had crucially been the general commanding ISAF forces when British forces first deployed to Helmand. This gave him a unique perspective on the war. In what had now become a customary speech at Chatham House, General Richards (who had only just returned the previous day from another flying visit to Helmand) reiterated the now orthodox view that the British Army could not be allowed to fail in Afghanistan. 'We must remain absolutely focussed on delivering success in Afghanistan,' he warned his audience, but the message was probably intended for the government.[795]

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There was a flat note to this game of military musical chairs. Changing generals did not alter the facts on the ground. The newly-appointed McChrystal was as constrained as his predecessor and under even greater pressure to achieve success. The foundations which McKiernan had left could not be changed fundamentally.

The ISAF command inherited by General McChrystal had swelled to over 58,000 troops. There were forty-two contributing nations. The smallest, Georgia, supplied just

one liaison officer. The largest, the United States, was providing over 26,000 soldiers. In between these two extremes were a host of minnows undertaking tasks of varied usefulness: 170 Macedonians, 120 Albanians and 70 Slovenians laboured somewhere within the ISAF ark. Larger contributors such as Italy (2,350 soldiers), Spain (780 soldiers) and most notably Germany (3,465 soldiers) deliberately avoided being drawn into fighting. When the numbers were summed, too many nations were 'peripherals' and too many were offering 'stand aside' forces, using Anthony Cordesman's terms. Only about 15 per cent of ISAF was actually committed to the fight, the majority of which were American forces. The other salient observation that could have been made of ISAF was the near total absence of Muslim countries. In the summer of 2009, the United Arab Emirates was contributing one platoon of soldiers to ISAF and Jordan had deployed just seven servicemen. The lack of Muslim support to Afghanistan should have been a source of enduring shame to the Arab world.

McChrystal did not have time on his hands. He arrived in theatre just as the fighting season was getting underway and with McKiernan's reinforcement plan already too advanced to be substantially changed. What he did have was the opportunity to take a blank sheet of paper and re-think the entire strategy in Afghanistan. Supported by a small team of hand-picked military officers and outsider civilian experts like the academic Anthony Cordesman, McChrystal keenly seized this opportunity. These civilians worked *pro bono* and even paid for their own air flights, a reflection of an admirable sense of public service in American culture. This attitude would not have been found in a Britain where an ex-defence secretary could describe himself as a 'taxi for hire', and quote absurd £5,000 daily consultancy fees.

The product of the intensive, three month long brain-storming session – succinctly sub-titled 'Commander's Initial Assessment' – was presented to Defense Secretary Gates on 30 August.[796] The anticipation that attended the publication of this study was high and its readers were not disappointed. McChrystal displayed a Montgomery-like clarity both in his thought and prose.

The problem was simply expressed: could ISAF achieve its mission? And if so, how and with what resources? Acknowledging that ISAF faced a deteriorating situation and a growing insurgency McChrystal offered three key ideas. First, ISAF had to redefine the fight. 'Our objective,' he wrote, 'must be the population.' This was not a new mantra, either to the Americans or to the British who had argued this view most forcibly under Brigadier Mackay two years previously. 'Population-centric COIN', to use the jargon, had

been, at least in theory, one of the foundations of the American strategy in Vietnam. 'The Vietnamese people are and must remain,' Chief of Staff General Harold Johnson wrote in 1966, 'the true and paramount objective of all U.S. Government efforts in Vietnam.' McChrystal was repeating this very old refrain.

Second, ISAF had to win short – in the next twelve months – in order to gain long-term. As one of McChrystal's staff put it, the war could well last another ten years, but it would be decided in the next twelve months. Making a decisive difference could no longer be postponed. Third, ISAF had to change its culture in two principal ways: the Western alliance had to better connect with Afghans and better connect with itself, operating in a more unified manner. Drawing from these three fundamental concepts, McChrystal proposed four pillars to the new strategy: closer mentoring of the Afghan forces (a policy that would become known as 'embedded partnering' to distinguish it from what had existed previously); better governance, a key plank over which ISAF in practice had little control; a re-gaining of the initiative, for which McChrystal planned to ramp up special force operations (Joint Detention Operation 435); and the geographic re-focusing of resources where they were most needed. In the short term, this would be south-west Afghanistan. On an organizational level, McChrystal made two significant changes: he established the NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan (NTM-A) on a firm footing, and he rationalised the ISAF Joint Command.

This, in essence, was 'the McChrystal Plan' and very little of it was new, a point which McChrystal generously conceded. All of McChrystal's predecessors, from McNiell onwards, had broadly followed these policies and programs. A line could be drawn even further back to various Vietnam-era programs. McChrystal's efforts to unify the campaign had echoes in the 'One War' strategy. Mentoring had roots in the CAPs (Combined Action Patrols). The plan to conduct industrial-level special force operations bore resemblances to the Phoenix Program undertaken to extirpate the Viet Cong. Protecting the population could be traced to Pacification. In this respect, McChrystal was dusting off old schemes that had been tried before by a previous generation of American military commanders. McChrystal was a diligent student of the Vietnam War and in fact over the summer had reread Stanley Karnow's seminal history of the conflict.

It followed with an unfortunate logic that McChrystal could correspondingly not avoid the same problems that had beset the Vietnam War, or the 'avoided issues' to borrow a phrase coined by one of the anonymous authors of the leaked Pentagon Papers.[797] In this former war, there was the flawed assumption that more American advisors ('mentoring' in

the modern term), would result in greater effectiveness in the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). But as the Pentagon Papers argued, this assumption was exceedingly hard to prove, and with hindsight, easy to disprove. More in the end did not increase quality - it simply turned out more bad soldiers. Then there was the 'chicken-and-egg argument' over security which bedeviled the Vietnam War. Was Pacification (securing the population) the precondition for winning the loyalty of Vietnamese farmers (hearts and minds), or did that loyalty have to won first by good governance, in order for Pacification to stand any chance of success? Was it realistic to expect Western soldiers to pacify and win hearts and minds – to protect the population, in McChrystal's strategy – if that population did not support the government? There was no certain answer to this question, and few alternative ideas.

What imbued 'the McChrystal Plan' with special purpose was the man himself. McChrystal succeeded where his predecessors had failed in stamping his considerable reputation and personality on the plan – perhaps the most vital ingredient a general brings to a battlefield. The comparison with Montgomery has already been made. McChrystal had the same electric effect all the way down the rank structure so that even the lowest private sensed there was a new commander in charge, and importantly that the new brass hat was playing to win. The feeling that you are on the winning side is a battle fought in men's minds and it was McChrystal's genius to win this battle first within the first few months of his command.

The second battle, with the perceptions of the Afghan people, was naturally going to prove a much tougher fight. McChrystal liked to use the analogy of Afghanistan as a room full of argumentative and violent people. ISAF, acting as a moderator, could not settle the argument. The people of Afghanistan would decide which speaker offered the most compelling and attractive argument. ISAF's role was to ensure that the people were given a fair chance to make this choice in a stable and lawful country. This was why McChrystal emphasized in his directive, 'Focus 95% of your time building relationships with them [the Afghans], and together with the Afghan government, meeting their needs,' adding sentiments that a Vietnam-era general would never have uttered, 'We will not win by simply killing insurgents'. This was the most important difference between the two wars – Westmoreland's attrition warfare had so scarred the American military establishment that no American general would ever countenance revisiting those painful days and arguments. As a result, McChrystal would be associated with the opposite strategy, or the draconian policy of 'courageous restraint', a point that was not actually made with any force in his original assessment, but which fell out as the natural corollary from a need to protect the

population.

The hidden contradiction in ‘the McChrystal Plan’ was one which President Obama himself created and which lay at the heart of America’s confusion over its war in Afghanistan. Under the new Democrat government America’s mission was now firmly to ‘disrupt, dismantle and eventually defeat al-Qaeda and prevent their return to Afghanistan’. This was a Biden-championed mission, promulgated as presidential policy on 27 March that relegated the more nobly unmanageable task of re-inventing Afghanistan as a prosperous, benign democratic state. This was also the mission clearly supported by Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

If this was the new mission, then was McChrystal even fighting the right war? Al-Qaeda had been disrupted and dismantled eight years previously. The surviving rump of that original al-Qaeda had withered to near irrelevance (although it could not be, and never was stamped out). The notion that Osama bin Laden was riding out the American storm and that he would one day return to Afghanistan in triumph was fanciful at best. The last place on earth where the fugitive would now seek refuge was Afghanistan. The glory days had vanished in clouds of smoke thrown up by American missiles and bombs. Al-Qaeda – as commentators tirelessly pointed out – was an international franchise and ideology, everywhere and nowhere. Defeating al-Qaeda by waging a narco-nationalist war against Afghan Pashtuns – for this was the war McChrystal was really fighting – seemed a costly and odd way of going about this probably impossible task. When McChrystal stated that his mission was to defeat the Taliban (to be fair, this mission was given to him by the Joint Chiefs), the proposition was straightaway challenged by the civilians in the National Security Council. What was the point of defeating the Taliban? How did this serve America’s national security interest? In this respect McChrystal had been asked, like General Creighton Abrams in Vietnam, to preside over the funeral rites of an unpopular war by his political masters. Even as McChrystal threw all his intellectual rigour at the problem of winning a counter-insurgency war, influential voices in Washington were already beginning to view the entire American commitment in central Asia in a very different light. Exit and not victory strategies were being sketched.

The other thorny issue was troop numbers. General McKiernan’s request for more troops had already been heeded – over 21,000 fresh American soldiers and marines were sent to Afghanistan in the first half of 2009. McChrystal would ask for more arguing that without more troops the ISAF mission could not succeed. This request for additional troops deeply divided American politicians with one eye on the polls and another on

history. The spectre of Vietnam-style escalation was never far away when it came to calculating the costs and benefits of military operations on Capitol Hill. Kennedy had wisecracked that sending reinforcements to a war was like taking a drink; once the effects wore off, you reached for another drink. Was America heading towards another Vietnam hangover? General McChrystal had no control over events in Washington. Nor could he control the machinations of Karl Eikenberry who viewed McChrystal's plans for an expanded war with grave misgivings. In the summer of 2006, a Lieutenant General Eikenberry, then the Combined Forces Commander in Afghanistan was posed the question by the Armed Services Committee whether he would prefer more troops or more reconstruction funds to bolster the mission. His answer was unhesitating and unequivocal:

'If you ask me, Chairman, the question right now, would I prefer to have another infantry battalion on the ground of 600 U.S. soldiers or would I prefer to have $50 million for roads, I would say the answer is I would prefer to have $50 million for roads.'[798]

From the outset, Eikenberry's instincts led him to the conclusion that Afghanistan needed more tarmac and less bullets. Fighting could not be the answer, a view that he continued to argue in his post as Ambassador. In November, two memos to Secretary of State Clinton, transmitted from Karl Eikenberry's office in Kabul, would be leaked to *The New York Times*. The timing of the leak was deliberate and directly challenged McChrystal's proposed strategy. Eikenberry's view, expressed in the memos, was bleak: the war, as it was being fought, was a lost cause. A corrupt Karzai government had grown dependent on America, and expanding the war would only serve to deepen the dependency. In Eikenberry's words:

'I support COMISAF's military analysis and recommendations as logical and compelling, within his narrow mandate to define a military counter-insurgency campaign within Afghanistan…but the purposes confronting our own strategic purposes…are broader. These unaddressed variables include Pakistan sanctuaries, weak Afghan leadership and governance, NATO civil-military integration, and our national will to bear the human and fiscal costs over many years. The current military proposal sets aside each of these issues and many more because they are outside COMISAF's counterinsurgency mandate. Yet, in reality, each has the potential to block us from achieving our strategic goals, regardless of the number of additional troops we may send.'[799]

Much of this criticism was unfair: McChrystal did recognise the wider strategic issues in his assessment including the problem of Afghan government corruption. McChrystal had not constrained himself to solely commenting on the 'military counter-insurgency

campaign' – there was no such thing as a military campaign that could somehow be isolated from everything else that was happening in Afghanistan. Everybody knew that. If criticism could be thrown at McChrystal it was that he had been unable to resist straying into areas outside the compass of military affairs, such as the need to reform civil governance.

In the end, the two men held irreconcilable views behind which they threw the weight of their reputation and experience. For Eikenberry, the military situation was not so dire that it required urgent reinforcements. For McChrystal, the war would be lost within the next year unless the decline was arrested. The older general sought more political engagement. The younger general sought further and decisive military engagement. That they held contrary views did not ruin their relationship. There was too much mutual respect and professionalism. But McChrystal later lamented there had not been more joint consultation with the US Embassy that may have resolved these differences.

Perhaps the real flaw lay in neither of these divergent views but in McChrystal's conviction that this was a war that *could* be won. Clearly, general rank is achieved by men who believe the winged Nike can be courted. So much is unremarkable. But in holding this belief McChrystal unfortunately joined the band of Vietnam generals who placed hope above realism. It was a measure of his self-scrutiny and honesty that he was not so blind to this jeopardy. The war could be won, *if* Washington willed it. Over the three months of the assessment period, it became increasingly apparent to him that this was not the case.

In *The White House Years*, Kissinger wrote with his almost preternatural wisdom, '… the most difficult lesson for a national leader to learn is that with respect to the use of military force, his basic choice is to act or to refrain from acting. He will not be able to take away the moral curse of using force by employing it halfheartedly or incompetently. There are no rewards for exhibiting one's doubts in vacillation; statesmen get no prizes for failing with restraint. Once committed they must prevail.'[800] McChrystal understood this viscerally, as a military commander does. But President Obama also probably understood this. However, he had not committed America's armed forces in the first place – he had inherited the clumsy decisions of the previous administration and did not feel beholden to prevail in dubious ventures he did not start. As he would later demonstrate when turmoil swept across the Middle East during his second presidential term, Obama was almost dogmatically inclined to refrain from acting, rather than involve America in intractable foreign squabbles. In the end, there was very little likelihood the President and his appointed superstar commander would have ever agreed on this point – the couple were

ill-matched paramours heading for a bust-up, long before that bust-up eventually happened the following year.

In his second ISAF directive McChrystal subsequently ordered that in future all operations be undertaken jointly with the Afghan National Army. 'We will live, train, plan, control and execute operations together at all command echelons,' he wrote, adding, 'from the Government Ministries down to platoon level.'[801] This was a clear signal that ISAF's exit strategy was being pinned on building up the Afghan security forces to the point where Western forces could start withdrawing. It was the only viable exit strategy left to ISAF but the fact remained that the British task force had been operating jointly with ANA since the beginning and the latter's capacity to operate independently was limited at best.

Self-deluding reporting about the capabilities of the ANA had become an unfortunate feature of the war. According to ISAF figures the ANA was taking part in 'over 57 per cent of deliberate operations' and in some parts of Afghanistan it was leading all operations. There were now 116 ANA fielded units, of which 46 had been certified as capable of independent operations (a misleading category known as CM1 units). A further 32 were classed as CM2, or capable of leading an operation with ISAF support, and 38 were classified as CM3, or capable of taking part in combined operations. As of September 2009, ISAF claimed the ANA numbered 94,000 troops and two battalion-sized *kandaks* were graduating each month.[802]

The reality was somewhat grimmer. A plan to accelerate the growth of the ANA to a ceiling of 134,000 soldiers (in time for the next US presidential election) was scoffed at by critics who argued for twice this number. The cost of this ambitious expansion plan blanched treasury officials. The ANA and ANP were wholly dependent on Western (almost exclusively American) funding. Just to sustain the present Afghan security forces would probably cost the US taxpayer $10-20 billion over the next two presidential terms.[803] As worrying, ISAF claims of the ANA's preparedness to assume responsibility for the security of Afghanistan simply did not match the reality on the ground. Later in the year, when the commander of the US marines in Helmand was asked what his number one problem was, he replied baldly: 'The ANA'. In the spring of 2011, a more honest assessment of the ANA would conclude that in fact just one battalion was capable of independent operations.

If the build-up of the ANA was failing, there was one aspect of the war that seemed to

be going well, and which strengthened the argument in Washington that America was fighting the wrong kind of war – a costly counter-insurgency war rather than smart counter-terrorist war. The American reinforcement in Helmand had coincided with a ratcheting up of America's covert strikes against the Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership (known as HVTs or High Value Targets), using armed drones to attack their Pakistani sanctuaries. The controversial strikes run under a CIA-led program and conducted by the aptly named Predator UAV were proving highly successful – at least in terms of killing insurgent and terrorist leadership figures. In the 1990s the Clinton administration had agonized over using armed drones to kill Osama bin Laden. The sticking point had always been a fear that innocent civilians would be killed in a missile strike. Ten years later, such ethical and legal debates had lost their weight. America was at war and she had the means to strike (with Pakistani compliance) her enemies. There had only been one Predator strike in 2004, and one in the following year. By 2008 a cross-border attack was being conducted every ten days, and by 2009, every few days.[804] By the time the British launched Operation Panther's Claw in the summer of 2009, there had been thirty-one Predator strikes against Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership targets in Pakistan.

The Predator missions, mainly run from Camp Salerno in Khowst province, were not without controversy (the basing of American drones in Pakistan would always be denied, although there was ample anecdotal evidence that this happened). What was undeniable was that the strikes were taking place in Pakistan, the overwhelming majority in North and South Waziristan, and they were causing a large number of civilian casualties. One estimate suggested that Predator strikes had killed 317 people in 2008. By mid-2009 this figure had already been exceeded; perhaps as many as 365 people were killed.[805] The same pattern was being repeated in other US drone campaigns, in Yemen and elsewhere. The reason for this high civilian death rate lay not in drone technology – which seemed to obsess some media organizations and lobby groups, however many times it was explained that the technology was neutral – but in the Rules of Engagement (ROE). It was evident from the casualty statistics that UAV pilots in CIA-led programs were operating under ROE that offered wider latitude to prosecute a strike, expressly a greater tolerance of civilian casualties. By contrast, RAF UAV pilots in Helmand operated under a zero-tolerance policy, with self-evident outcomes. By the end of 2013, the RAF had launched over 450 Predator strikes and only one had resulted in civilian casualties, an unfortunate incident that could not have been predicted or avoided. It was a measure of Pakistani compliance (or willingness to take backhanders) that both the military and later civilian government would turn a blind eye to so many of its citizens being killed by American

airpower on Pakistani sovereign territory.

Perhaps as many as one in five strikes were resulting in the death of a Taliban or al-Qaeda leader (17 out of 76 strikes by mid-2009).[806] Baitullah Mehsud, the Taliban military leader in southern Afghanistan was targeted nineteen times. On the twentieth attempt he was killed provoking an internecine struggle which was won, predictably, by a close relative. The roll call of al-Qaeda commanders that inadvertently revealed their hideouts was long. Abu Jihad al Masri, the al-Qaeda intelligence chief; Abu Sulayman Jazairi, head of the organisation's external operations; and Osama al Kini, who led al-Qaeda operations in Pakistan, were all killed.[807] A number of al-Qaeda members who were complicit in the US embassy bombings a decade earlier were also killed. Justice at last seemed to have been served. The great unanswered question was how close the Predator strikes were getting to catching the ultimate target, Osama bin Laden himself. As long as he remained at large the UAVs would maintain their watchful orbits over Pakistan's tribal areas.

The pressure on Taliban leaders was also felt in Pakistan from a reinvigorated (or prodded) Pakistani military determined to flush out tribal militias in the border provinces. Under an earlier peace agreement – the Malakand Accord – seven districts encompassing about a third of North Waziristan had been handed over to Taliban-dominated tribal leaders. As well as the notorious Swat valley these included Malakand, Buner, Dir, Shangla, Chitral and Kohistan. The generous deal had followed two years of inconclusive skirmishes that *de facto* left the Taliban in control of these areas anyway. Facing an apparently more serious threat from the Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud in South Waziristan, the Pakistani Army now sought a truce on its northern flank to allow it to build up forces against the southern threat.

For the tribesmen of Waziristan, the Malakand Accord was just one more worthless treaty in a history of worthless treaties stretching back to the Anglo-Afghan wars. Lord Curzon had famously remarked: 'Not until the military steamroller has passed over [Waziristan] from end to end will there be peace' but nobody had ever managed to tame these mountain men.[808] The British fought a sustained campaign against the Mehsuds and Wazirs for half a century to no avail. Some of the larger campaigns involved four times as many troops as the British ever managed to deploy to Helmand.

Emboldened hot-headed Taliban gangs now swept south advancing to within 100 kilometres of the capital and several of Pakistan's nuclear facilities. Criticised at home and

abroad, the newly appointed civilian government ordered a military counter-offensive, and to its possible surprise watched as the Pakistani Army rolled up the Taliban and sent them flying northwards again. Claims that over 2,000 Taliban had been killed were almost certainly exaggerated but the Pakistani Army's claim that the Swat valley had been cleared of militants was not. Under pressure on both sides of the border, Taliban morale seemed to wane (or an ancestral survival instinct overtook an appetite for confrontation). The insurgents melted away into the hills nursing their wounds and planning the next comeback. For Pakistan's government these periodic offensives were double-edged. Relief agencies estimated that between 240,000 and 400,000 refugees had been displaced by the fighting (adding to a burden of 500,000 refugees from previous fighting seasons).[809] An inevitable retaliatory suicide bombing campaign followed the army's offensive that would cost hundreds of lives. Indeed, in the 'Af-Pak War', Pakistan was paying the heaviest price by some significant margin. According to the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), in 2009, there had been 2,586 terrorist attacks claiming just over 3,000 lives and injuring another 7,000 civilians. Overall fatalities from the border wars had exceeded 12,000.[810] The majority of Pakistanis were against the anarchy provoked by the wild hill men of the north - and neither were they supportive of al-Qaeda - but they did not wish to live with the constant threat of bombs in Peshawar bazaars. Reconciling security in the hills with security in Pakistan's urban centres was a problem the Pakistani government would never resolve satisfactorily.

The Taliban were beginning to feel the pressure in their pockets as well. According to ISAF sources, some thirty-seven counter-narcotics operations had been conducted by the summer of 2009 which had led to the seizure of more than 100 tons of poppy seed and forty tons of opium. This was ISAF's best record to date and suggested that the halting counter-narcotics campaign was beginning to enjoy some limited success.

This was the backdrop which the British faced when, on 10 April, 3 Commando Brigade officially handed over to 19 Light Brigade, commanded by Brigadier Tim Radford. This brigade had only recently left Catterick in Yorkshire and had been relocated to Northern Ireland. Two of the infantry battalions were drawn from bases in Northern Ireland (2 Rifles and 2 Mercians) but the other infantry battalions were collected from across the mainland. These included the Welsh Guards, 2 Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, and the Black Watch, based at Inverness. The brigade's cavalry regiment of Light Dragoons, a Geordie outfit, was ironically based in Swanton Morley, in deepest, rural Norfolk. Almost all the combat support units, including the brigade's gunners and sappers, were drawn

from Northern Ireland.

The brigade was known as ‘the Black Panthers’ and it sported a panther’s head on a green triangle as its logo. 19 Light Brigade had already been deployed at the beginning of the Iraqi campaign as well as on the violent Operation Telic 9 in the summer of 2007. In total, the brigade numbered about 8,100 all ranks. The history of this formation very much reflected the contingency approach to wars taken by previous British governments. Stood up to fight in the South African wars the brigade had subsequently been disbanded. It was then raised again and twice disbanded in the two world wars. In the post-war period, 19 Light Brigade had been involved in operations in Malaya, Borneo, Cyprus and the Suez. Its latest commander was under no illusions that the brigade was probably going to face a long hot summer of fighting every bit as difficult as these previous campaigns.

For any brigade deploying to Afghanistan the luck of location had become all important. 2 Rifles drew the short straw and was deployed to the most dangerous location of all - Sangin. The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Rob Thompson described what he found:

‘Our area of operations, the patch, was about the same size as Dorset, approximately 2,225 km^2, a massive area for a Battle Group numbering 1,100 soldiers; there were over 25 different cap badges represented in our ranks including the RAF and one sailor!’ [811]

To make up the numbers the battlegroup was reinforced by A Company from 2 RRF thus creating five line companies. A Company was deployed to FOB Jackson in Sangin; B Company was dispersed between FOB Inkerman, FOB Wishtan, and FOB Gibraltar, the most dangerous locations; C Company took over FOB Nolay and a number of southern bases; and I Company was given the relatively benign task of securing Kajaki Dam. As well as a virulent and confident insurgency, 2 Rifles faced the additional challenge that the official governor of Sangin, an Alikozai named Haji Faisal, was proving as useless as his counterpart in Musa Qaleh, Mullah Salaam. By contrast, the unofficial Taliban governor, Mullah Abdul Khaliq, was demonstrating all the qualities that the British were seeking in a governor: decisive leadership and respect from the tribes.

The Black Watch (3 Scots), commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Cartwright, assumed the role of the theatre reserve battalion based at Kandahar. This battlegroup would be reinforced by forty-six Territorial Army soldiers, an impressive commitment from Britain’s citizen soldiers. The battalion would be busy: the Black Watch undertook thirteen battlegroup and seven company operations (including fourteen air assaults) during

its tour, but everyone knew from the casualty statistics that the Kandahar-based battalion undertaking mobile operations suffered the least fatalities of all the British infantry units deployed in Afghanistan.[812] What nobody could have guessed in the spring was that the Black Watch would be the last British battalion to undertake this role. In October, a panicked government would announce that Britain would no longer deploy an infantry battalion to Kandahar, in order to concentrate its forces in Helmand. Arguably the most successful British battalion in south-west Afghanistan would be withdrawn to meet the political imperative of demonstrating to a critical electorate that more troops were being sent to Helmand.

The Welsh Guards, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Rupert Thorneloe, took over in central Helmand, now viewed as the district of greatest importance to the British campaign. Number IX Company, a composite sub-unit led by Major Sean Burchill was initially deployed to Lashkar Gah as the protection company for the Brigade HQ and PRT. Prince of Wales's Company took over PBs Argyll, Pimon and the checkpoint (CP) at Blue 29; Number Two Company took over PBs Silab and Tanda, along with CPs Paraang and Haji Alem; Number Three Company, divided into four OMLTs, was detached to 2 Mercians in the Sangin area; and a 'Task Force Nawa' was deployed to PB Jaker which would eventually be handed over to US marines. Prince of Wales's Company was then subsequently deployed to Chah-e-Anjir ('Fig Tree Well') and named their patrol bases 'Shahzad' or 'Prince'.[813] The oddly titled IX Company was, in fact, a romantic resurrection of 1 Company, 2 Welsh Guards, a battalion placed in suspended animation in 1947. A second and much smaller X Company was also established to train the ANA. These ad hoc re-organisations pointed to the deeper malaise within even the well-recruited Guards Division. The point has already been made many times in this book: the British Army simply did not have enough infantrymen.

The Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters, now re-named 2 Mercians, were on their third tour of Afghanistan. Lieutenant Colonel Simon Banton found himself in the familiar position of previous infantry commanding officers in Helmand without a coherent command. A Company was deployed to Darvishan, in the south, under command of a Light Dragoons battlegroup. This was where the company had been deployed just eighteen months previously, before the surge by 24 MEU that finally expelled the Taliban from the environs of the town. The contrast was plain to Captain Simon Cupples, who had served in the previous tour:

'What was once a deserted town with only enemy in the area is now a hustling [sic]

bazaar with many shops offering a wide selection of goods. There has been a project to tarmac the road that runs through the District Centre, and to install solar powered street lights. This is an amazing achievement; bearing in mind some of the locals will have never driven on or even seen a tarmac road before!'[814]

Other elements of the battalion were deployed as OMLTs in central Helmand, taking over from 1 Rifles.

The fourth infantry battalion in the brigade was 2 Royal Regiment of Fusiliers (2 RRF), commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Charlie Calder. This was deployed to Battlegroup North-West, centred on Musa Qaleh. C Company held the District Centre in the town itself and B Company was deployed to PB Woqab. A Company was detached to FOB Nolay in support of the 2 Rifles battlegroup in Sangin.

19 Light Brigade deployed to Helmand knowing that it would embark on one of the biggest operations of the war to date. On 5 June, on the eve of this operation, John Hutton the Secretary of State for Defence resigned, simultaneously announcing that he would not stand as an MP at the next general election. Once again, there would be a change of personality at ministerial level in the British war in Helmand at exactly the wrong juncture – a poor contrast to the American practice of five year terms of service across different administrations. From the perspective of a personality like Defense Secretary Gates, it may have seemed that Britain's political classes were simply not taking the war seriously enough.

Hutton was succeeded by Bob Ainsworth the Minister of State for the Armed Forces, a former trade unionist at Jaguar Cars before joining the Labour Party. The new incumbent arrived with spoonfuls of self-abasement. In an interview with *The Daily Telegraph* he confessed:

'I have strengths and I have weaknesses. I don't pretend to be able to write a great thesis or doctorate…I don't try to second guess decisions that are quite properly taken in the military chain of command. I don't try to pretend I am cleverer than a general or the Chief of the Defence Staff…I speak with a Midlands accent. I drop my aitches. I suffer with an asthmatic-related condition that means I speak with a gravelly voice. I have a moustache that some people appear to take offence to.'[815]

But behind this faux humility was a determined personality (even, it appeared, in matters of self-interest – when the scandal over MP expenses broke out in 2009 it emerged that he was the joint highest claimant for a second home allowance amongst his fellow

MPs, although there were no suggestions of impropriety). He would need this determination in the closing battles fought between the Treasury and the MOD in the last months of the Brown government. Bob Ainsworth was also one of the most attentive Defence Secretaries that served on Operation Herrick. He seemed to genuinely empathise with the ordinary men and women who were risking their lives in Helmand, seeing perhaps in their commonness a mirror of his own humble background. His tenure in the end was short, but honest.

19 Light Brigade began its tour by launching Operation Zafar.[816] This took place in an area seven kilometres north of Lashkar Gah, in the south-east corner of Nad-e Ali and Babaji Districts. Zafar illustrated all the worst traits of British operations in Helmand, as well as the idealism of the soldiers tasked to undertake these operations. The aim of the operation was to clear a Taliban gang from a small village called Basharan astride the Shamalan canal. But the problem in Basharan was not the lawlessness provoked by insurgents, but rather by poor local governance. Basharan was a failed village. Dominated by Barakazi (there were nine sub-clans compressed in this area), Basharan had witnessed an influx Saids, Noorzais, Baluchis, Zakzais and Tarikzais. Poor water management following the extension of the Shamalan canal had resulted in salination, loss of productive lands and reduced acreage. The land west of the village had reverted to semi-desert. During the Soviet period the village had become a frontline. Old Russian positions were still visible north of the settlement. An even older ruined fort, known to the locals as ‘the British Fort’, testified to the Anglo-Afghan wars. For the villagers with long memories, foreign soldiers meant fighting. What Basharan badly needed was modest investment but all the British were about to offer was more bullets and bombs. The village also desperately needed corrupt-free police but as IX Company of the Welsh Guards discovered, the local ANP were a bunch of virtually useless drug addicts. In these circumstances, it was entirely unsurprising the villagers wanted nothing to do with the local government, and were even less impressed with the notion of British soldiers ‘liberating’ them from the Taliban. Basharan in this respect encapsulated a paradox that the British were well aware of: that by supporting a corrupt government they were necessarily casting themselves as enemies of the very people whose ‘hearts and minds’ they were trying to win.

Zafar was billed as an operation led by the Afghan National Security Forces but from start to finish it was British-led and largely fell on the shoulders of Major Sean Burchill, the Officer Commanding IX Company. The police were so poor, Burchill gave up on

them. The ANA, mentored by British troops, proved equally useless and disinterested. As a consequence, IX Company was forced to assume responsibility for the operation but had too few soldiers. The stretched guardsmen fell back on occupying compounds overlooking the village which quickly became a *de facto* frontline. Unable to dislodge the gunmen, the British then resorted to firepower, dropping bombs and calling Apache strikes on suspected insurgent positions. To the dismay of the guardsmen, the local fighters weathered these attacks and would not quit. Eventually, Basharan did 'fall' after significant damage had been wrought and the civilian population displaced. Burchill was so moved by the ruined state of the school in the village (which had reportedly been closed by the Taliban after executing the head teacher), he resolved to make the restoration of the building his personal mission. This idealistic, South-African born officer moved bureaucratic mountains to revive a rudimentary education system in Basharan, but he would not see the fruits of his efforts. In June he was killed by an IED, travelling in a Jackal, near the village he had adopted as his own.

In the second half of June - and coinciding with Operation Khanjar ('Strike of the Sword'), an offensive in southern Helmand conducted by US marines – the British launched Operation Panchai Palang ('Panther's Claw'). This was to have been the second half of Operation Sond Chara, mounted by 3 Commando Brigade in the previous tour, but the marines ran out of time and resources. The aim of Operation Panchai Palang was to rid an area north of the provincial capital that had become a safe haven for the Taliban. As Brigadier Radford put it, the operation would 'liberate' 80,000 Helmandis who were living under the oppressive rule of the Taliban and who would now be able to vote in the forthcoming elections. In this hope at least, the British would be sorely disappointed.

The ground over which the operation was conducted was classic Helmand Green Zone: a patchwork of fields, irrigation ditches, tree lines, and compound farm buildings. This was bocage country in stifling heat and with an elusive enemy. Babaji and Malgir Districts were backward oases sandwiched between Helmand's two principal towns: Gereshk and Lashkar Gah. The British were surprised to discover that some of the tribesmen in this area had no clue that they were actually residents of any particular district – there was no government, at all. Instead there were over twenty villages, each headed by an elder, and no overall district leader. The overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of these districts – perhaps 95 per cent – were Barakzai. This tribe was heavily involved in the opium trade and had little incentive to support the British. On the extreme western and northern edges there were smaller communities of Noorzai, Ishaqzai and Popolzai that had spilt over from neighbouring Nad-e Ali. These minority tribes resented the Barakzai hegemony and were

at loggerheads. There was not one hospital or recognized school in the entire area. The backwardness was stunning.

Panchai Palang had four ‘objectives’ in the classic military sense. From east to west, these were the Barakzai villages of Char Coucha, Paind Kalay, Rahim Kalay and Walizai. From top to bottom, the valley resembled a triangle tipped on its right side. At the apex of the triangle, in Malgir District, the Green Zone was no more than two kilometres wide. At the base of triangle, on the boundary of Babaji and Nad-e Ali Districts, the Green Zone stretched for almost fifteen kilometres. In total, the British would have to cover about twenty kilometres of difficult ground contested by tribesmen that were likely to put up a fight. As the entire operation lasted about five weeks, this meant that 19 Light Brigade achieved a rate of advance of somewhat over 500 metres per day, or slower than a formation in Normandy. In fact, the brigade never reached its final objective, the south-west corner of Babaji known as Loy Adera (later nicknamed ‘the Babaji Pear’ by the soldiers because of its shape). This contrasted with the far swifter US marine Operation Khanjar, which was effectively concluded in four days, and which greatly resembled a Vietnam-era air mobility operation. Why were the British so much slower?

The plan for Operation Panchai Palang, it seems, was undermined by several weaknesses. The first flaw was purely conceptual: Malgir and Babaji could not be ‘liberated’ as if they were a piece land ‘occupied’ by an enemy. In this respect, Panchai Palang repeated the fallacy of Operation Sond Chara, conducted by 3 Commando Brigade the previous winter, from which it was derived. The likelihood was that a grand sweep through the area would provoke a strong tribal response, with or without the incitement of insurgent gangs. This is exactly what happened. Indeed, it would take three more years to ‘liberate’ Babaji by which time the British were handing over to local forces and withdrawing. Ironically (or perhaps predictably), the Afghan security forces would only remain in situ for about a year before abandoning virtually every British-built patrol base and check point, and calling into question what had been the point of ‘liberating’ Babaji in the first place.

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Barakzai resistance was even more probable given that 19 Light Brigade chose as its axis of advance exactly the same route used by a Soviet battlegroup, which conducted a similar operation against the tribesmen in 1983, also launched from the area of Gereshk. Unbeknown to Task Force Helmand, this area also had a rich history of violence post the Soviet-Afghan War. American special force operations against ex-*Hizb e Islami* fighters in

Malgir, before the arrival of the British, had exacerbated the problem. These events left yet another legacy of resistance that would never be fully overcome by the British. According to Michael Martin, anti-ISAF feelings had run high in this area since the mishandled Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program in 2004 that resulted in Mir Wali's fall from power, and the disbandment of the 93rd Division.[817] It was this process that led Mullah Omar to appoint the Ishaqzai Mullah Saddiq as shadow district governor, and it was certainly the case that localized areas of Malgir and Babaji remained implacably resistant to British blandishments, or firepower. These appeared to be mainly inhabited by the ex-*Hizb* mujahidin who became mislabeled as 'Taliban', and who the British eventually fought. Some, it appears, were followers of Sher Mohammed Akhundzada, freelancing as 'Taliban'.[818]

The second and critical weakness in the plan was precisely the axis of advance. The brigade proposed to squeeze its entire force down a single, gravel track known as the Old Babaji Road, which ran down the spine of the valley. This was a huge risk. The track followed a wavy line, joining clusters of *kalays* or villages, and was believed to be the only trafficable route in the entire area. In the event, the heavy military traffic collapsed every single culvert on the Old Babaji Road. As the British lacked the necessary engineer resources to keep their battlegroups moving (fascines and trackway), this meant that every culvert became a major obstacle which ground the advance to a standstill. For the local villagers, the British brigade became a slow-moving caravan of vehicles which could be blocked at the front and readily picked off from the sides. In the west, the Welsh Guards would also advance on a single track, again with deleterious consequences. Other elements then compounded these difficulties: an extreme risk aversion to the threat of IEDs; logistic difficulties re-supplying and sustaining the advancing battlegroup; and the debilitating effects of the heat.

A third factor was a lack of troops. In the Second World War, an objective like Malgir and Babaji Districts would have been a divisional task. Radford was being asked to complete the task with one Light Dragoon battlegroup. In fact, he was attempting the job with an under-strength and ad hoc unit. The Light Dragoons was made up from one formation reconnaissance squadron; a depleted A (Grenadier) Company, 2 Mercians; and B Company, also from 2 Mercians. Egypt Squadron, 2 Royal Tank Regiment mounted in Vikings was being used in a resupply role, and the few Mastiffs available to the battlegroup were used both as a BG HQ, and as a ferrying service. This was a completely inadequate force.

Lastly, there was a cultural ponderousness and conservatism which reflected the different styles of the British and Americans, dating back to the Second World War. Paradoxically, in the modern period, this was amplified by the adoption of American jargon and processes which encouraged the British to churn out reams of nugatory staff work, based around illusory ‘effects’. The principal ‘effect’ of Operation Panchai Palang was to provoke violent local resistance, which was the one effect not entered in any of the wishful ‘effects synchronization matrices’ produced by staff officers. The uncomfortable and probable truth was that a modern British Army brigade, tinted by a managerialism that had crept into the armed forces, could no longer devise a plan without cranking through sand-clogged gears of byzantine, unnecessary staff work, still less execute that plan quickly. This contrasted with the speed of action of the Falklands generation, just thirty years previously. In this latter conflict, a small field HQ, necessarily generating very little and in some cases no paperwork at all, mounted two brigade operations in the space of forty-eight hours against the ring of Argentine hill defences west of Stanley, winning five tough battles on the trot. The ‘effect’ of this singular application of military force was to win a war – a concept that was unfortunately eluding modern soldiers. A modern British Army ‘mega-techno HQ’, it appeared, was forfeiting hope of commanding such agile, flexible, reactive forces, or savouring the winning ‘effect’. To give another example and taking one generational step back, in the first year of the Korean War, 27th British and Commonwealth Brigade was instructed to redeploy from Taegu to Kimpo, a distance of some 260 miles. The official war history recorded, ‘…the entire event was accomplished without a single written order…’[819] Panchai Palang appeared to illustrate that there was an inverse correlation between the speed and distance a British Army brigade moved, and the amount of paperwork it generated.

Ironically, the mountain of staff effort was largely redundant anyway because the British actually knew very little about the area they were about to invest. The expensive array of intelligence gathering systems – the entire ISTAR (Intelligence Surveillance Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance) process - had not yielded the human intelligence needed by commanders. As the Brigade Chief of Staff later recalled, the first good intelligence came when a colonel took it upon himself to walk into a refugee camp and ask the simple question: ‘Who comes from Babaji?’[820] Good intelligence also began to flow when the Light Dragoons clashed with armed gangs, old-fashioned ‘reconnaissance by fire’ trumping more sophisticated systems.

19 Light Brigade did have one significant advantage. The valley was bounded on all

three sides by waterways. Along the southern border ran the Helmand River. Even at the height of summer, it afforded few fording points for vehicles. On the northern border ran the Nahr-e Bughra canal. This had only two recognized vehicle crossing points: one to the north in a wadi that led to the village of Spin Masjid; and one to the south, in a second wadi known as Luy Mandeh. On the western border ran the Shamalan canal which had fourteen crossing points. In fact, this western border was broken up by three further canals that extended like crooked fingers from a bend in the Helmand River in the south-west corner of Babaji (the 'Babaji pear'). If the British could seal the crossing points on the three waterways, they could at least hope to trap any insurgents that chose to stay and fight.

About 3,000 troops were committed to Operation Panchai Palang, including two mechanised companies from the Danish battlegroup and companies from the ANA 3/205 Brigade. The hard fighting, however, was undertaken by the British. The estimated number of enemy fighters in Babaji and Malgir Districts was five hundred, although this was just a wild guess. The large number of troops involved on the fringes of the operation only added to 19 Light Brigade's logistic problems.

This would be the key difference between the British-led operation in the north and its twin US marine-led operation in the south. The latter, involving the same number of troops, was concluded swiftly. The US marines swamped Garmsir and Dishu districts in a series of air mobile operations. On 2 July, one marine battalion was airlifted into Nawa (relieving a besieged Welsh Guards sub-unit that had been holding the isolated PB Jaker); a second took Mian Poshteh, followed by Koshtay and Lakari; and a third seized Khan Neshin. Remarkably, the bulk of the US marine combat troops were dropped on or driven to their objectives within the first twenty-four hours of the operation. 19 Light Brigade would never be able to exert the concentration of force that Task Force Leatherneck was able to achieve. It would only be able to squeeze the balloon in one place, knowing that it would inevitably expand somewhere else.

If the British could not concentrate their forces like the US marines, they at least hoped to achieve surprise. In this they would also be disappointed. Days before the start of Operation Panchai Palang it became evident that civilians were leaving the area. Operational surprise would not be achieved, although the plan, as it unfolded, would recover some measure of tactical surprise.

In retrospect, could the operation have been conducted in a different manner? One option would have been to set more modest targets: perhaps sealing the two gateways to Babaji

and Malgir at Luy Mandeh and Spin Masjid respectively, and allowing subsequent brigades to expand the ‘security bubbles’. Another would have been to conduct a US-marine style air mobile operation, seizing the four objectives in one move. A third would have been to invest Babaji from the north, infiltrating across the Nahr-e Bugra canal at several points, and advancing on more than one axis (four tunnels ran under the canal, which was also bridgeable anyway). These alternatives, it appears, were not considered, or if they were, they were discounted.

The prelude to Operation Panchai Palang began on 19 June, under cover of darkness. About 350 men of the Black Watch were lifted by helicopter to the southern crossing point in Babaji, on a bend in the Nahr-e Bughra canal. On the eve of the operation the troops observed a moving tribute to one of their recently fallen comrades, Sergeant Sean Binnie who had been killed in Musa Qaleh, before gorging on hamburgers and chips and mounting the awaiting helicopters.[821] The unlucky Binnie had posted a grenade through a door only for the gunman to jump out and shoot him at point blank range.

Panchai Palang was the largest British Army air assault operation in many years and it required the entire lift of available Chinook helicopters (twelve aircraft) to transport the Jocks. Due to a lack of British Chinooks, six of these helicopters were provided by the USMC, an embarrassing reflection of the ongoing problem the British were experiencing in providing sufficient helicopters for the UK task force three years after entering Helmand province. The total package included: twelve Chinooks, two Sea King (used as sniper platforms), three UH60 Blackhawks, two AH64 Apaches, one AC130 Spectre Gunship, a pair of Harriers and two Predator armed UAVs. Four of the helicopters took off from Bastion with the Commanding Officer’s Tactical Party and B Company under Major Al Steele. The other six flew the longer distance from Kandahar carrying A (Grenadier) Company, led by Major Matt Munro.

The Black Watch’s target was a well-known narcotics bazaar and a collection of compounds near the village of Lakhshak Kalay. This was divided into two objectives: Zermatt, the bazaar itself that would be secured by A Company, and Whistler, the western end of the wadi that fell to B Company.[822] Awoken by the commotion, a group of local men gathered in the darkness to investigate. This group paid a price for its curiosity and was attacked by circling aircraft on the suspicion that the men were insurgents.[823] This proved to be the only action of the night. As dawn broke it became evident the entire area was deserted. The opium bazaar that had been described as a major narcotics hub was also empty although there was enough detritus to suggest the market stalls had been used to

trade in opium. In anticipation of the arrival of the British the Taliban had laid eight IEDs in the bazaar, each one of which had to be laboriously cleared.[824] In total, A Company would clear twenty-two IEDs, with a further thirteen IEDs discovered by B Company. All the surrounding farm houses were empty and the 'goodies' which the soldiers had brought with them (gifts for children) proved useless – there were no children anywhere. B Company would not find a single civilian until the fourth day of the operation when a teenage boy was found scavenging for bread, and an old man with bad legs was discovered sitting outside a shack.[825]

These rare encounters had elements of farce. The fear of IEDs was so great that the patrol sent to investigate these exotic civilians set off in the dead of night across fields and was subsequently pulled out by well-protected armoured vehicles. Jon Boone, the *Guardian* journalist who accompanied the patrol, was bemused to watch three British officers trying to 'influence' the old man (a military euphemism for spreading positive messages). The notion that there was any point to 'influencing' a senile, crippled local left behind in a village was clearly ludicrous and did not escape the attention of the journalist. Despite enforcing a media blackout during the operation, print and television reporters were able to publish their accounts after the operation. It was thanks to insights provided by reporters like Jon Boone that the realities of these operations were glimpsed. MOD reporting on Operation Panchai Palang - on which everyone relied in the absence of independent reporting - was selective and frequently just unsubtle propaganda.

It was not just the lack of civilians that was apparent – there was also a lack of enemy, or at least dead enemy. An independent television crew that followed the operation for three weeks failed to find a single enemy corpse. The only corpse discovered by the troops was that of a young girl, with limbs splayed, in the middle of a field. Under the summer sun her decomposing face had greyed and judging from the expressions on the soldiers' faces, she stank. The angle of her limbs suggested that she had been killed by cannon fire or an explosion. It appeared that the mistake she had made was to run away across open ground, something no insurgent would have done. At the conclusion of the operation the British would state that only three civilians were killed. If this was true, she may have been one of them.

The lodgement the Jocks established over the next few days was not entirely peaceful. There were some sporadic gun battles but these were desultory affairs. Serious resistance to the British presence only lasted about two days. At one point a group of gunmen crawled to within 100 metres of 1 (Minden) Platoon's position, but they were seen off with

a withering amount of machine gun fire, mortars and artillery.[826] On another occasion, three gunmen were spotted by a circling Reaper UAV. The UAV pilot launched a Hellfire missile and killed one of the men (at $100,000 per shot, this was an expensive way to kill a villager with a rifle). With no civilians to worry about, the defenders could afford to lavish large amounts of ordnance on anyone suspicious approaching the compounds the Jocks had taken over as patrol bases. On another occasion, a 500 pound bomb was dropped on a compound from an American B1-B bomber, one of only ten bombs dropped in the entire operation.[827] At FOB Wahid, the name given to the newly established company base, two snipers took pot shots at the Jocks for almost the entire duration of their two week stay. Eventually, '5 Pl was tasked to mount an ambush patrol to try to catch the perpetrators who were becoming increasing brazen. In position by 4am, the ambush was triggered at 8am as one of the sections saw two insurgents moving into position at close quarters. In the ensuing fight they killed one and an armed UAV was able to track and stop the other'.[828] The lack of enemy activity did not mean rest for the soldiers. Building a FOB (and second patrol base at a location called Crossing Point 1) required heavy manual labour. Although there were Royal Engineers on hand to provide some of the heavy lift, the infantryman still had to fill over 3,000 sandbags to bolster their defences.[829]

Within a few days a front line formed around the Black Watch positions and crossing that front line invited fire from the other side. In the first week of the operation Major Steele decided to investigate a small bazaar to the west of the British positions where it was believed there had been some suspicious movements. It became apparent that he had walked into the middle of the enemy's position when an RPG round flew past his head, in mid-radio conversation with the 5 Platoon commander who was providing the escort party. A hasty withdrawal followed.[830] On another occasion, when B Company conducted a patrol south of its position with 6 and 7 Platoons, an RPG round landed between a Lieutenant Pearce and one of his section commander, Corporal Copel. Fortunately for both men, the warhead failed to detonate.[831]

These gun battles remained intermittent and over time the appetite for challenging the British presence waned. The Black Watch reconnaissance platoon conducted mounted patrols in Jackals to reassure any returning locals they could find, but these were few and far between. The mortar platoon, fulfilling the reputation of all mortar platoons in infantry battalions, settled into its own luxurious compound decorated with Afghan tapestries and containing a prized bed. The most serious injuries experienced by the Black Watch were a

twisted ankle and a swollen eye from an insect bite.[832] By the time the Jocks were relieved by Number 2 Company of the Welsh Guards on 4 July - eleven days after they had seized the lodgement - they were entertaining themselves swimming in the Shamalan canal. The enterprising soldiers had even built themselves a diving board. Others fished, adding carp and crab to the menu of rations. According to the battlegroup, as many as forty-eight insurgents were killed, but no bodies were recovered and this was probably an overestimation.[833]

For the Welsh Guards who relieved the Black Watch, operations began on 25 June in the bottom corner of Babaji with the investment of Chah-e Anjir by Prince of Wales's Company. The battlegroup axis of advance then took it east of the town of Chah-e Anjir, where the marines had raided a Taliban cache the previous winter, veering north and running a further six kilometres to the junction of the Shamalan and Nahr-e Bughra canals. The guardsmen's mission was to advance along a levee track (Route Cornwall) that ran parallel to the canal, and to block or destroy fourteen crossing points, ranging from foot bridges to road bridges. Running almost parallel to this canal track was Route 603 to the west (Route Dorset), a straight gravel track which American contractors had built in the 1950s. In effect, the Welsh Guards would be slamming shut the door before a sweep was conducted from east to west by the Light Dragoon and 2 Mercian (Worcesters and Foresters) battlegroup, preparing to deploy from the area of Gereshk.

This was the plan, but it contained serious flaws. The original area of operations ascribed to Lieutenant Colonel Thorneloe was so unfeasibly large he felt obliged to protest to the Brigade HQ, forcing a re-adjustment of boundaries. The proposition that the guardsmen could somehow seal off the Shamalan canal was also fanciful. The lack of helicopters was worrisome. Most acutely, the battlegroup was being asked to advance along a single narrow axis – the levee track – which could easily be interdicted by seeding IEDs. Inevitably, this is what happened.

Progress was slow for the heavily-laden infantrymen. Conscious of the danger of roadside bombs the Welsh Guards advanced cautiously, clearing and marking safe lanes for follow-on vehicles carrying re-supplies and stores. There was intermittent resistance and it was obvious that the Welsh Guards' progress north was being watched by the locals. A favoured tactic was to allow a convoy of vehicles to pass and then activate a roadside bomb (by connecting a battery to the circuit) to catch the convoy on its return journey. It was on returning from such a journey in a Viking that Thorneloe was killed, alongside his teenage driver, Trooper Joshua Hammond serving with 2 Royal Tank Regiment. It took

three days to recover all the body parts. Thorneloe's death – he was the most senior British officer killed in Helmand – caused great commotion in Britain. Pictures of his widow, fists clenched on the steps of the Guards Memorial Chapel, were splashed on all the front pages of newspapers. Prince Charles, who had known Lieutenant Colonel Thorneloe personally, attended the funeral service, as did former Secretary of State for Defence, Des Browne, whom he had served as a military assistant. The well-attended funeral service did not quite bury the commanding officer whose death would have one more twist. In October, a Conservative MP and former guardsman received an unsolicited e-mail from a friend which included secret extracts from an e-mail sent by Lieutenant Colonel Thorneloe just before his death. Thorneloe had already begun to gain a reputation within the brigade for his outspoken manner which caused tensions with the brigade headquarters. In the extracts, he almost presaged his own demise lamenting that he had 'virtually no' helicopters to transport his soldiers and this was forcing him to undertake risky road moves. Damningly, he asserted that ISAF helicopter management was 'not fit for purpose'. Three weeks after sending this e-mail he was dead and his words ended up in *The Daily Mail* newspaper.

The death of these two soldiers marked the beginning of what would prove to be the bloodiest month for the British task force in Helmand. The Welsh Guardsmen reached the Black Watch lodgement eleven days after they left their lines of departure, but the cost had been high. At the beginning of July – at the height of Operation Panchai Palang - a grim milestone was reached. After a bloody week of fighting British fatalities suffered in Afghanistan exceeded the number suffered in the unpopular war in Iraq. Fifteeen soldiers were killed in just over a week and eight were killed in just one twenty-four hour period (an event that would provoke the mothers of the fallen soldiers to start a bereavement support group). At the field hospital in Camp Bastion medical staff worked overtime to save lives. 656 patients would be received over the course of the operation and at one point half of Britain's blood supplies were being diverted to Afghanistan.[834] For Surgeon Commander Sarah Stapley who served for nine weeks at the hospital, Operation Panchai Palang was a conveyer belt of amputations. By the end of her tour she had amputated sixty-two limbs including eight limbs in one frenetic day.[835] The total number of British soldiers killed in Helmand now stood at 184 and in the smoke and mirrors of Whitehall there were rumours that the Labour government was planning to cut and run – a charge quickly countered by the nervous Prime Minister in a letter to MPs.

It was clear by the summer that opinion on the war had become angrily divided. The

camp that argued for an immediate withdrawal (which included the distinguished British military historian Corelli Barnett) was challenged by a bullish camp that pressed for more troops and an American-style surge - the sacrifice would have to continue until success had been achieved. This was a classic sunk cost fallacy and Catch 22 argument. Nobody wanted to be the first person to write off the moral debt to the dead. It was a former Russian general, quoted in a British newspaper, who summed up what some feared but dare not express in public:

'I believed as sincerely as US officers do now that we were fighting there to help make our country safer. After the war…I could see this war had been pointless.'[836]

The casualty toll in the summer of 2009 would reach unprecedented levels. Between July and September there were 1,155 Category A casualties across Afghanistan (these were casualties with life-threatening injuries, such as traumatic amputations).[837] Critically, for these casualties, around 60 per cent of medevac calls were being responded to with 'wheels up' at Camp Bastion within fifteen minutes, and the MERTs (Medical Emergency Response Teams) were extracting casualties within sixty minutes, in 80 per cent of cases. In the cases where the MERT was unable to extract the casualty within this 'golden hour' the problem was not distance or the availability of helicopters but almost invariably ground fire. The Taliban by now had become well-used to the routine of a medical helicopter arriving to recover casualties and would prepare ambushes at anticipated landing sites. The Geneva Conventions only ever applied to one side.

The problem the government faced was that there was little to show for three years of sacrifice, or indeed the latest depressing statistics. What exactly was the war being fought for? ISAF (or more properly the American-led Operation Enduring Freedom) was no closer to finding Osama bin Laden (or eradicating al-Qaeda and its allies in Afghanistan). The consensus belief that he was still hiding out somewhere in the border areas of Pakistan was never challenged by the possibility that he may have long been smuggled to somewhere more congenial. Osama bin Laden was not by inclination a cave-dweller. He was an exiled Saudi prince-figure with a healthy appetite for good living. For years, a caricature image of the fugitive was presented which was at odds with the nature of the man. To thousands of Muslims he was a hero and not a few of these would have been happy to ensure that Osama bin Laden continued his expensive lifestyle, somewhere in a secret location. The argument that waging war in Afghanistan meant that terrorism was being kept at bay from Britain's shores was believed by a dwindling minority. The war was provoking the possibility of terrorism and Britain's home-grown terrorists had no links with Afghanistan – they were

mainly, but not exclusively, drawn from disaffected ranks of young Pakistanis. The conflict had spread instability across the entire region, honest governance had not been brought to Afghanistan, and the Taliban seemed to be getting stronger. By all measures, the war seemed to be going backwards.

For the soldiers, isolated from this mounting concern at home, the operation continued to unfold despite the setbacks. The day after Lieutenant Colonel Thorneloe was killed two Danish mechanised companies supported by a troop of tanks seized crossing points south of Gereshk. The third phase of Operation Panchai Palang was about to be executed. With the crossing points secured the Light Dragoon battlegroup passed through the Danish positions and began to advance south-west. For a combination of reasons, Lieutenant Colonel Gus Fair's men arrived at their lines of departure in some disorder. The only consolation for the exhausted cavalrymen was the mirage-like vision of some Danish female APC crews wandering across the battlefield dressed in shorts and vest tops.

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This area of Malgir District was fiendishly difficult ground. The battlegroup would have to negotiate a ring of villages separated by intensively cultivated farmland. The most common annotation on the maps carried by the soldiers was the phrase 'numerous ditches'. Every hundred metres the soldiers faced an obstacle that could conceal a firing point, or bog down their vehicles. Acting Corporal Pattenden serving with 25 Field Squadron Royal Engineers described some of these difficulties when his section was tasked to open a route over a stream, a task that was expected to take a few hours and in the end took four days:

'Our effort was to get routes open, enabling convoys of mastiffs to get forward to the troops in forward locations. One of the first tasks required was a route upgrade about a kilometre from A1 echelon. SSgt Pascoe had recced it and we were briefed that it required about 2 hours work to put in a fascine across a pretty small stream about a meter wide. In reality this was a lot more complicated! Work lasted all day, then the following day work carried on with just about every vehicle coming through getting bogged in and the plant operated by Spr Cormack had to recover them. After 4 days the job was finally complete.'[838]

One of the problems facing these young sappers was that the Royal Engineers no longer held route-opening equipment developed from the experience of the Second World War. The kit that did exist, such as trackway and fascine-layers, had not been deployed to

Helmand at all or in sufficient numbers, despite previous commanders noting that obstacle crossing equipment was imperative to negotiate Helmand's Green Zone.

It took the Light Dragoons thirty-six hours to clear through the first village. A Scimitar was destroyed but the crew miraculously crawled away from the vehicle unscathed. By the morning of 5 June the advance was resumed with A Company on the right and B Company on the left clearing the area of Abpashak Wadi. Straightaway, the battlegroup was engaged by fleeting gunmen. To add to the friction, the point sections began finding IEDs, some double-stacked and containing large charges. In one incident the uncovered IED was so large it completely cratered the route and blocked any further movement. An American Paladin counter-IED team was forced to blow down a wall and dozer the earth into the crater to allow the advance to continue. In the meantime, B Company had stumbled into an ambush and suffered multiple casualties. By the end of the day, the Light Dragoons had advanced a mere 400 metres.

The following morning it was A Company's turn. Within half an hour of advancing from night time harbours, the forward left platoon was caught in an ambush and suffered seven casualties. Unfortunately, the stricken platoon was on the wrong side of an unfordable ditch, which significantly complicated the casualty evacuation. The inconclusive fighting then continued for the rest of the day with neither side making great headway. By the second night, the battlegroup had only managed to push the insurgents back a few fields, despite support from Apaches, artillery and mortars.

On the third morning, a decision was taken to use air strikes to end the stalemate. This proved decisive. Four bombs were dropped on a compound 200 metres forward of A Company and this seemed to unlock the gate. The subsequent advance was not, however, without resistance. More casualties were sustained and Trooper Christopher Whiteside, a twenty-one year old from Blackpool who had overcome a serious knee injury to serve with the Light Dragoons, was killed by an IED. By the fourth night, Emsdorf Troop, which had lent ten men to A Company, was down to two survivors. Overall, a troop that started with thirty-four men would be left with eight survivors - three were killed and twenty injured. This troop was led by a Lieutenant Tresham Gregg who would subsequently be awarded the Military Cross. Gregg was another example of the family sacrifice in the British Army: he was the grandson of the wartime Royal Tank Regiment officer, Colonel Tresham Gregg, a distinguished officer who served in several theatres and who fought as a partisan in Italy. The subaltern's father, another Tresham Gregg, was also a serving officer in the Light Dragoons.[839]

Every track had to be checked for roadside bombs, so the battlegroup continued to advance at the pace of the slowest mine sweeping soldier. As the insurgents were laying IEDs 'like minefields', that pace was slow. It took a further five days for the battlegroup to cover just four kilometres. Commonly, IED belts were covered by ambush parties. Four days into the operation, Lance Corporal Kyle Smith, serving with the Mercians, was leading his section across an open field when the soldiers were ambushed. Four soldiers fell in a hail of automatic fire. Smith attended to the nearest casualty exposing himself to the Taliban fire over 100 metres as he pulled the wounded soldier into cover. Having rescued one comrade Smith again risked his life dragging a second casualty into cover. For these acts of bravery, Lance Corporal Smith was awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Cross.[840] In a similar incident, Corporal Craig Adkin, a company medic also serving with the Mercians, found himself crisscrossing bullet-swept fields to tend to casualties from a RPG strike. He would be awarded a Military Cross for this courage under fire.[841]

IEDs had undoubtedly become the biggest single menace facing British soldiers in Helmand and the summer of 2009 was the period when this menace spiked dramatically on every graph. By the mid point of the tour, 19 Light Brigade had found over 900 of these road side bombs. Across Helmand, every sixteenth patrol was experiencing an IED strike. In areas like Sangin, every sixth patrol was now encountering an IED. The psychological impact of these odds – particularly for the Rifles deployed in Sangin – cannot be overstated. Morale became volatile. For the first time in the war, units had to deal with soldiers who struggled to step beyond the front gate of the patrol base and go 'outside the wire'. For the first time in a generation there were incidents of soldiers shooting themselves in the foot to escape the front line, as well as 'refusals' (soldiers refusing to patrol).[842] The number of non-battle injuries and illnesses at Bastion Hospital rose steeply raising suspicions that many soldiers were resorting to malingering. Was it coincidence that the location with the most soldiers reporting non-battle injuries and illnesses, by a significant margin, was Sangin? Over the course of Herrick 10, there were more than 3,000 cases of soldiers reporting gastro-intestinal sickness in Sangin.[843] Close to 2,000 cases of skin problems were recorded. As 'runny tummy' or rashes gave you a ticket to light duties, or even a day off, the conclusion one could draw was obvious. Lieutenant Colonel Rob Thompson put on a brave face in Sangin – what else could he do? – but the numbers suggested that he was commanding a battalion on the edge. In a previous generation such soldiers would have faced court martial. A modern generation treated the issue more sensitively and nobody was in a mood to start prosecuting soldiers

whose nerves were frayed beyond any reasonable level.

176 of these devices would be discovered on Operation Panchai Palang, accounting for nine out of the ten fatalities experienced on the operation, but the true number laid by the insurgents to stall the British advance was many times higher. Not every bomb could be found and the Taliban recovered devices that had been inadvertently bypassed by the British. The fatalities provoked by IEDs across the last two years of the war told their own story. In 2007 just eleven British soldiers had been killed by IEDs and sixteen had been wounded. By the following year the figures had risen to thirty-eight and 113 respectively. In 2009 – the year in which the Taliban began mass laying of IEDs – casualty figures almost became unsustainable. Seventy-eight British soldiers were killed and a staggering 328 were injured – an entire battalion was written off from this hidden menace. Over 70 per cent of British fatalities were being caused by IEDs and the soldiers facing this daily threat were well aware of the statistic.

The majority of the roadside bombs encountered by the soldiers on Operation Panchai Palang continued to be the simple pressure plate variety, commonly using saw blades freely given to farmers in aid programs. This exploitation of cheap materials was also evident in the growing use of fertilizers to make home-made explosives– a phenomenon which had echoes of IRA home-made bombs (Afghan tribesmen actually proved more resourceful bomb-makers than Irish nationalists). As the British improved the protection levels of their vehicles, so the local bomb-makers increased the size of their IEDs. It was a deadly arms race played out on the tracks and trails that crisscrossed the Green Zone. Ammonium nitrate mixed with a tell-tale grey aluminium powder were the favoured ingredients used to fill 10 litre plastic containers, pressure cookers or small drums. A frustration for bomb disposal officers was that agencies promoting reconstruction in Helmand were deliberately supplying high nitrogen content fertilizers to the farmers – the very type that made the best bombs.[844] Eventually the British would attempt to ban the import of this fertilizer to Helmand with mixed success.

The size of IEDs was not the only concern. Over the 2008-09 fighting seasons it became increasingly obvious that the Taliban were no longer planting single road side bombs. They were planting ‘IED fields’, a sort of nuisance minefield designed to trap British forces in a maze of bombs. In the summer of 2008, the discovery of six roadside bombs by the Royal Irish in Sangin was considered newsworthy. By the following summer, 2 Rifles located at the same base would find five times this number of bombs in one day. These IED fields presented a terrible hazard to soldiers responding instinctively

to save a comrade injured by an IED, who then became injured or killed themselves. Bomb disposal officers found that they were being especially targeted either by the design of the IED, or the cunning manner in which they were emplaced.

The devices the soldiers were finding were also becoming increasingly sophisticated. The command wire IED was perhaps the simplest form of remote device but examples were now being found where several hundred metres of wire was being pre-buried in anticipation of the opportune moment to connect a bomb to the end of the wire. The bombers were also beginning to experiment with the radio controlled bomb, using different types of Dual Tone Modulated Frequency (DTMF) receivers in an attempt to defeat British electronic counter-measures. Directional mines, essentially tins filled with nails or ball bearings, set at waist or head height, were beginning to appear in Helmand. One bomb disposal operator found the parts of half a motorcycle embedded in a bomb, to create shrapnel.[845]

The Taliban were not just laying cleverer devices, they also pressed children and animals into the game. 'Donkey IEDs' were perhaps the strangest permutation in the armoury. The British experienced at least three of these; one in Sangin, another in Garmsir, and a third described thus by an officer who witnessed the demise of the animal:

'Then in the afternoon the gate guard realised there was something suspicious going on. A group had just let go of a donkey a short way from camp and hurried off. He tried to divert the animal with flares and other warnings. Obstinacy not being the best quality in that situation, the beast of burden eventually had to be stopped by a rifle shot. The team went out and established there was something very suspicious under the bundle of hay carried by the donkey. Eventually one brave ANA warrior set fire to the hay with a flare from a distance, and 30 seconds later there was a considerable explosion. No one was hurt.'[846]

By the summer of 2009, when Operation Panchai Palang was mounted, there was irrefutable evidence of Iranian and Pakistani complicity in the bomb-making. The ISI had a long history of transferring bomb-making skills to the mujahidin. The Iranian al Qods force had been a source of IED and other war materials in Iraq. Now it appeared they were assisting the Taliban against the common Western enemy. In the spring of 2009 an American-led special force operation against a bazaar in Marjah district led to the biggest ever drug bust in Afghanistan's history. But what was noteworthy about this raid was what else was found: forty-four blocks of Iranian plastic explosives, hundreds of blasting caps, hundreds of kilos of opium base, 27,000 kg of ammonium nitrate (a sufficient quantity to

make literally hundreds of powerful roadside bombs) and three police cars. There could be no clearer example of the nexus between Iranian arms traffickers, Afghan drug traffickers and the corrupt Afghan police. At the conclusion of the raid American fighter-bombers completely destroyed the bazaar.

These developments were concerning but the single evolution in IED design that radically changed the nature of the war in Helmand was the introduction of Low Metal Content IEDs (LMCIEDs), and less commonly, No Metal Content IEDs (NMCIEDs). If one weapon might be described as the Taliban's Stinger (the American anti-aircraft missile that changed the dynamics of the Soviet-Afghan War), this was it. LMCIEDs used carbon rods instead of metal parts, such as the ubiquitous saw blades, to make the electrical connections to detonate the bomb. NMCIEDs were constructed entirely of wood with a wooden dowel placed over a crush-sensitive explosive used to set off the main charge. Neither could be readily detected by the Vallon mine detectors issued to the soldiers, and even some of the more sophisticated detectors later introduced into service struggled to detect such devices.

The technology did not come from Afghanistan. Pakistanis taught the Taliban how to make these difficult to detect roadside bombs (the directional mines or EFPs, Explosively Formed Projectiles, came from Iran). This was evident from the beginning because the insurgents clearly did not understand the technology and were placing LMCIEDs alongside the battery pack and even on top of the battery pack, thereby making them detectable to conventional metal detectors. It was only after a period of time that such devices began to be correctly emplaced with the battery pack remoted away from the pressure plate.

For soldiers sweeping for IEDs, the only sure ways to find the devices were detecting the battery pack (before stepping on the pressure plate), or ground sign (evidence of digging). One soldier sardonically noted that during his training he had been told to look for disturbed earth, but nobody told him that everywhere was disturbed earth. NMCIEDs remained very rare (because of the danger of the crush-sensitive explosive to the bomb-maker) but LMCIEDs proliferated, soon becoming the most common type of IED in Helmand. This created a terrible moral dilemma for commanders. Before the introduction of these devices, soldiers were leaving the safety of their bases with the knowledge that they had a fighting chance of beating the bombers, if they undertook their drills correctly. Now this was no longer the case. A patrol could carry out all the correct drills and still fall victim to an IED that was very difficult to detect. This, with a sickening inevitability, is

what began to happen over the months that followed. LMCIEDs were a far graver problem than the lack of protection on the Land Rover Snatch or the lack of helicopters – two issues highlighted by the media during the war – because there was no 'silver bullet' technological solution to the problem. Either the British had to concede the ground to the Taliban, or the patrolling had to continue with the certain knowledge that soldiers would be killed and maimed. Conceding ground was not an option so the patrolling continued and the casualties mounted.

Despite the increasing number and sophistication of the roadside bombs, it was a reflection of the success of the *range* of British counter-measures that a minority of these devices successfully detonated and claimed casualties. This was the key. There was no single technological solution and no counter-IED drills could cope with every situation. The combination of aerial surveillance and ground surveillance technologies provided one important layer of protection. The second vital layer was provided by the Afghan security forces and locals who pointed out the location of IEDs to British patrols. These were far more attuned to the environment than the average British soldier and could more readily spot something that was out of place. 'Turn-ins', as they were known, were often done at risk to the farmer who faced the wrath of the insurgents after the British bomb-disposal team had left the area. On many occasions the farmers dug up the IEDs themselves and deposited them at the nearest British base, to the consternation of the sangar sentries. The Afghan security forces – despite all the training that was offered – often took a much more cavalier attitude towards IEDs and indulged in 'self-help bomb disposal', commonly with unfortunate consequences. The last important element was simply leadership. LMCIEDs had a profound psychological effect on soldiers sweeping with the Vallon detectors – especially in the summer of 2009 when they first began to proliferate. It was clear to everyone that the risks had multiplied enormously. On more than one occasion, platoon commanders, sergeants, and even company commanders took over from their privates and led patrols to restore confidence in shaken troops. Lieutenant Colonel Thorneloe himself had taken the place of a private soldier and swept for IEDs, before he was killed. This was leadership of the highest order.

ISAF, ultimately, was very fortunate that the Taliban evolution of IEDs effectively ended with the LMCIED. Over time, mine-sweeping soldiers became extremely skilled in detecting the tell-tale signs of a buried bomb, partly from enhanced training, partly from the accumulated experiences of successive brigades, and lastly because of the introduction of specialized detectors. Somehow, the next technological evolution to the IED was never realised by the Taliban or their proxy suppliers, despite an American author with a

scientific bent inadvertently letting the cat out of the bag by posting an article on the internet examining the phenomenon of IEDs. Very fortunately, it seems to have remained unread.

By 9 July another phase of Operation Panchai Palang was drawing to a conclusion. After five days pushing south-west, the Light Dragoons battlegroup had reached a line astride the largest cluster of settlements in northern half of Malgir District. The battlegroup had been operating in a bottleneck barely three kilometres wide where it had faced determined resistance. Once past these villages the Green Zone widened, allowing the spear point to probe around insurgent positions. The wider frontage also meant that insurgents could more easily escape the advancing force, constrained to the central axis, because of the lack of trafficable routes on the flanks. The arrival of two reinforcing companies also added to the momentum of the battlegroup. In the first week, an advance of a few hundred metres was considered good. By the second week, the Light Dragoons were achieving one kilometre bounds.

Optimism over a possible collapse of resistance, however, proved premature. Several insurgent gangs had either been by-passed, or deliberately allowed the British convoy of vehicles to pass. These now began to harass the extended military cavalcade. To prevent more enemy reinforcements entering the area, a decision was taken to mount a second heliborne operation. This would act as a block ahead of the Light Dragoons. The task fell to B Company of the Black Watch, which had only just been extracted from Babaji. Overcoming its tiredness, the company duly launched again on 10 July, seizing two objectives named Mull and Eigg. The block remained in place for five days, but in fact encountered no enemy.

This cued the second push by the Light Dragoons. Paind Kalay, the brigade’s second objective, was secured on 13 July without a fight. Two days later, the third objective, Rahim Kalay, was also grabbed bloodlessly. The battlegroup had now reached the center of Babaji District. By now, it was evident that resistance against the British was evaporating. Many of the insurgent foot soldiers who had decided to contest the ground had been killed and commanders were losing heart. Faced with the possibility of being overrun, insurgent gangs were now fleeing the area creating lucrative targets for the Apache.

To the rear of the battlegroup, the fighting once again flared up in Spin Masjid and Malgir. This area was the responsibility of the Danish battlegroup. In response, the Danes increased the pressure on the insurgents, supported by a special forces raid on a ‘command

node' which seemed to precipitate a collapse of resistance.[847]

The final phase of the operation was initiated on 20 July with a third heliborne assault on Loy Aderah, this time mounted by A Company of the Black Watch, who linked up with C Company, 2 Royal Welsh, a sub-unit that boasted twenty-two Warriors. The Royal Welsh had driven their vehicles across eight kilometres of Green Zone in an armoured sweep towards the east bank of the Luy Mandah wadi. This was the first time the heavy armoured vehicles had been risked in this way and they were helped on their way by the hard, dry ground.

The deployment of the Royal Welsh had been a necessary but unplanned last roll of the dice. By this stage, the Light Dragoons battlegroup was exhausted and the brigade was still short of its final objective. Brigadier Radford needed to find fresh troops, but from where? At short notice, C Company was ordered to make the 100 kilometre drive south from Musa Qaleh and was given just four days to prepare for battle. As it chanced, the area they entered had largely been deserted by insurgents and the 35 ton vehicles were able to use existing tracks rather than destroy crops by traversing farmers' fields (platoons were handed out bags of cash to immediately compensate farmers anyway). Unfortunately, this decision, taken from good intentions, led to collapsed culverts and a headache for sappers tasked to repair the damage behind the advancing company group. For the locals, and especially the children, there seems to have been a certain excitement over the appearance of the Warriors. On one occasion, villagers actually joined in to assist a crew which had thrown a track. Over the next few days the company cleared 198 compounds and held three village shuras. There was virtually no fighting.[848]

On 25 July Operation Panchai Palang was officially declared over. In total, twenty-three British soldiers were killed, although only ten died on the operation itself. The remainder were killed in fighting that flared up elsewhere in Helmand, especially in the Sangin area. Three times this number of soldiers were seriously injured and many more were lightly injured. With Operation Panchai Palang, 19 Light Brigade shot its bolt. Although the brigade was still two months short of the end of its tour no further brigade-level operations would be attempted. The limits of British combat power had been reached.

Overall, the operation illustrated two faces of the British approach to operations in Helmand. It was conducted at a pedantic pace - no risks were taken even if this meant that the brigade advanced at a snail's pace. The slow rate of advance implied that local gunmen were never really put under pressure, at least by the advancing ground troops, and they

could always evade and disappear deeper into the Green Zone. From the air, the story was different. Insurgents could never really be quite sure whether they were being watched, or if a pair of Apache was lurking in the area waiting to swoop on them. Over the course of the five week running battle the Apache was the most effective weapon system in the British armoury. An accurate reckoning is impossible because of the lack of credible statistics, but it appears likely that the cannon on this flying machine accounted for the overwhelming majority of insurgent casualties. The troops on the ground barely glimpsed the enemy. The only soldiers catching sight of the elusive Taliban on a regular basis were the helicopter pilots and their gunners. The single exception to this rule was snipers who proved to be the most effective killers in the battlegroups. Over the course of the war, the British deployed a range of sniper rifles of varying calibres. These included the traditional, Accuracy International L96 7.62mm rifle, two variants of a .338 weapon, and the AW50 anti-materiel rifle that fired a .50 caliber round. Over time, sniper and counter-sniper tactics became refined and perfected. An outstanding example of this trend was two snipers, Serjeant Tom Potter and Riflemen Mark Potter, both serving with the Rifles, who reportedly managed to notch up seventy-five confirmed kills over a forty-four day period in the contested area of PB Shamal Storrai.[849]

Notwithstanding the slow pace and constrained resources in Panchai Palang, the plan was not unimaginative. The point of maximum effort was switched. Like a boxer, the brigade feinted with one hand in the south then delivered the punch with the other hand in the north. Three heliborne operations were mounted during the five week operation to open up passages for the advancing battlegroup. Each of these was undertaken with notable success. A complicated operation was deftly managed against mounting concern at home. There was no loss of nerve. Brigadier Radford declared that his brigade would flush the Taliban out of this stronghold, just ten kilometres north of the provincial capital, and this is what 19 Light Brigade accomplished.

Regardless of the military success of the operation everyone was aware that Panchai Palang's true measure of success could only be measured in the future by the security and development delivered to the districts. As a British military spokesman put it:

'Our intention with this operation was, in the short term, to clear the area in advance of the presidential and provincial elections so that we could ensure that the Afghan people were free to exercise their democratic rights. In the longer term, it was to remove the insurgents and hold the region, alongside Afghan forces, to allow reconstruction and development to take place.'[850]

Achieving these longer-term aims, of course, would always be much harder. Within days it was evident that Taliban had re-infiltrated the area and were already threatening any locals who co-operated with the British. Newly constructed checkpoints manned by Afghan police proved useless. It was too easy to bribe an Afghan policeman. Some had relatives among the gunmen. Within a month of the conclusion of Operation Panchai Palang, five more British soldiers were killed in Babaji. The hard truth was that the area had largely reverted back to less conspicuous but no less threatening Taliban control.

British commanders like Lieutenant Colonel Gus Fair who commanded the Light Dragoons battlegroup, and whose dusty, tanned face appeared on several BBC news bulletins, would have disputed this pessimistic view. Fair believed at the conclusion of the operation that 'more than ever this is a winnable campaign'. The Taliban, in his view, had become a self-serving terrorist organization. The farmers were fed up with the daily intimidation and welcomed a viable alternative (which was true). The cavalryman saw a different Babaji, waiting to be plucked from the Taliban's hands:

'I believe that in Babaji we are at or will soon approach a tipping point in the consent of a critical mass of the locals…Beyond this point I believe consent shall move irreversibly in our favour provided we remain determined to exploit the opportunity it presents.'

In the long term, Fair would be proved right (in most areas of Babaji), in the sense that local, tribal governance would reassert itself, and the Taliban would be told to poke off. But it would take another two years of hard fighting, and a further year consolidating the gains. Following the conclusion of Panchai Palang, Task Force Helmand would mount eight major operations and countless company level operations to subdue the insurgency in Babaji. They included Kapcha Azadi on Route Trident (winter 2009); Kapcha Sarek in Rahim Kalay (July 2010); Kapcha Luma in Char Coucha (October 2010); Kapcha Bambarak in Tor Ghai (December 2010); Kapcha Kwandi which revisited Char Coucha (January-February 2011); Omid Shash in Kopak (February 2011); Kapcha Lewe in Kopak and Malgir (March-April 2011); and Omid Haft in Kopak and Padaka (May-June 2011). This relentless effort finally yielded the prize, but first the British would suffer another reverse.

From the beginning, the forthcoming presidential election had been set up as a measure of the success of Operation Panchai Palang. This proved an unfortunate misjudgment. As the election drew nearer the omens looked increasingly poor. To cope with the largely illiterate Afghan population, voting would be cast by fingerprint. The Taliban threatened

to cut off the fingers of anyone who voted by checking for the tell-tale signs of indelible ink. The campaign of intimidation appeared to be succeeding and all the indicators were suggesting that the rural population of Hemand would not vote. At one point the new British ambassador Mark Sedwill visited Nad-e Ali District, pointedly refusing to wear a ballistic vest to show that it was safe to walk the streets, but the gesture meant little to ordinary Helmandis. With a population of just over 800,000 it had originally been planned to open as many as 222 polling stations across the province to cater for about 600,000 potential voters. It soon became apparent that this plan was wholly unrealistic. In the end only 107 polling stations would be opened but the British hoped that at least this reduced number would still capture the majority of the voting population.[851]

The detailed picture, however, remained disappointing. Two districts, Baghran and Dishu would have no polling stations at all, disenfranchising perhaps 60-70,000 voters. Five districts had failed to register voters disenfranchising a further possible 120,000 voters. The ambassador's upbeat claim that 'we are confident that the majority of eligible voters in Helmand who want to will be able to vote' was for the cameras but the claim was wild of the mark.[852] Perhaps the most disappointing numbers emerged from Nad-e-Ali District itself which the ambassador visited. This was Helmand's most populous rural district with a population of over 100,000. British operations in this district, since the autumn of 2008, had been promoted as a move to liberate the villages from the stranglehold of the insurgency, and thirteen polling stations were opened. On the eve of polling just 625 people had bothered to register in Nad-e Ali and nobody was expecting more. It was rapidly becoming apparent, even to the most determined optimist, that the voting in Helmand would be a fiasco. In the never-never land of the Kabul Embassy, this reality was not recognised. On the eve of the elections, and before a single vote had been cast, the Embassy published a DIPTEL (diplomatic telegram) predicting that the election would be a 'decisive defeat' of the Taliban. In a war bunged-full of self-deluding reporting, few official British documents more deserve framing. That it was published by an Embassy that constantly sniped at the soldiers for promoting over-optimistic reporting only adds gilt to the frame.

When voting day arrived on 20 August it turned into the disaster that doomsayers had predicted. There were 139 gunfights across the British-held areas, the most violent day of the entire tour. Nobody voted in Garmsir, newly 'secured' by US marines. Perhaps 150 people voted in Babaji.[853] The claim that 80,000 more Helmandis would now be able to vote, following the end of Operation Panchai Palang, rebounded spectacularly. In Nad-e-

Ali, possibly 800 fraudulent votes were cast. The numbers elsewhere were similarly disappointing; Chah-e Anjir (2,297); Luy Bagh (321); Zarghun Kalay (231); and Shin Kalay, just one (presumably the self-appointed village elder).[854] In Sangin, within minutes of opening the polling stations, gun battles erupted around the District Centre. The local Taliban kept up this barrage of fire for the rest of the day. The riflemen defending the District Centre enjoyed the punch-up, but for the 16,000 odd registered voters in the town voting day was a surreal experience punctuated by Apache helicopters, bombing runs from coalition aircraft and artillery fire. A pall of smoke drifted across the town by the end of the day. The questionable report that 500 people had still managed to vote was hardly the victory for democracy that the British had lauded. In nearby FOB Inkerman the fighting was no less intense. By the end of the day, the riflemen had lobbed 133 mortars and 172 artillery shells at insurgent positions. Supporting Apaches fired about 500 30mm cannon rounds and loosed off twenty-eight flechette rockets and a Hellfire. British Tornados, American A-10s and Belgian F-16s joined the fight. Two 500 pound bombs were also dropped to fend off the attacks.[855]

In some locations, such as Chah-e Anjir, where Prince of Wales's Company, Welsh Guards was based, the fighting became the entertainment:

'The finest example of how simple communication turns a crowd was on Election Day when the town's perimeter was attacked around thirty times resulting in AH fire missions, GMLRS and many small arms engagements. By using a sound commander on the polling centre roof to give voters prior warning of our fire missions, at times whilst the indirect rounds were actually in the air, voters knew the reason for the bangs. Indeed, after the first few rounds the crowds began to cheer every subsequent explosion knowing the enemy were being hit. We had generated a carnival atmosphere…'[856]

In Musa Qaleh, a deal with the Taliban to allow voters to cast their vote for Karzai appeared to fizzle out, if it was ever really agreed. Hardly anyone bothered to vote but somehow about 9,000 votes had been cast for Karzai. The wily Akhunzada appears to have been behind the vote-rigging. These were his tribal heartlands and he would decide the outcome of the Musa Qaleh vote. Across the province, perhaps 8 per cent of the electorate had managed to vote, principally in the safe towns of Lashkar Gah and Gereshk. Nationwide perhaps 30 per cent of the electorate had voted and there had been numerous attacks with about two dozen people killed.

Aside from the meaninglessly small turnout there was a further consideration that filled

the British with misgivings. Only about eighty local monitors had been hired who covered just three districts. The twenty or so international monitors had been even more constrained. The opportunities for massive electoral fraud were abundant and hardly likely to be resisted. It did not take long for the fraud to become apparent. The initial electoral report from Helmand indicated that about 50,000 people had voted. Within a week that number had climbed to 300,000. Bitterly, the British had to concede (in private) that they had presided over a massive exercise in ballot stuffing. Nobody could pretend that the vote in Helmand had been fair or open. The Taliban had won an unlikely victory and could truthfully claim that they had thwarted the elections. Perhaps the only consolation, at least for ordinary Afghans, was that in the end just two voters were reported to have had their voting finger chopped off, both in Kandahar. The threat of mass digital amputations had been sufficient.

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Nationwide, the election results were no less disastrous. It rapidly became apparent that there had been widespread electoral fraud. As President Karzai inched towards the required 50 per cent threshold needed to avoid a second round run-off, the scale of the fraud became clearer. Perhaps a third of the votes were tainted, mostly in favour of the Pashtun president. Richard Galbraith, serving as deputy to the UN mission in Afghanistan, resigned following allegations that his Norwegian boss tried to suppress his strong criticism of the election process. Five other members of staff also submitted their resignations. In the end ISAF was left with two irreducible and irreconcilable facts: the election results were illegitimate, and Karzai had won the necessary majority of that illegitimate vote. None of the options open to address this fraudulent outcome was palatable. A re-run appeared logistically impossible and it was doubtful that Afghans would wish to vote again. Forcing a second-round vote would unlikely reverse the outcome anyway and could make matters worse. Forming a national coalition government seemed impossible as Dr Abdullah Abdullah had vowed that he would not serve in a Karzai government.

The flawed Afghan presidential election was a serious blow to the West and a significant coup for the Taliban. The capstone of ISAF’s strategy was that it was supporting legitimate political governance. It was now unarguable that Western soldiers were propping up a corrupt and crooked government without a legitimate mandate. Echoes of Vietnam once again sounded in Washington. In a sense, however, nothing had changed. Karzai had always been expected to win. But the manner in which he won seemed to

strike a near mortal blow to an increased American commitment to Afghanistan. President Obama would be awarded the Nobel peace prize less than two month's later – the first time this award had been granted to a serving US president since 1919 - but this was poor consolation now that 'Obama's war' in Afghanistan had turned sour.

The tensions in Washington became public and difficult to conceal. Richard Holbrooke had already indicated that the root of the problem lay in Pakistan, not Afghanistan. The Taliban were merely an 'outer rim' of the deeper problem of international terrorism. In the meantime, his relations with Karzai deteriorated to the point where it became transparent he was actively seeking to depose him. Vice-President Joe Biden, ironically, became an outspoken champion of the Rumsfeld doctrine. America should fight 'lite', smart wars and not get bogged down in expensive, intractable wars propping up corrupt regimes. His Democrat colleagues in Congress strongly agreed. Perhaps the old Republican dog, a vilified figure of the Neo-Con right, had been correct all along. General McChrystal, who might have been expected to support a light, special force war, turned unexpectedly heavy. In a leaked report, the general indicated that he wanted a further reinforcement of 40,000 troops to avoid defeat in Afghanistan, in effect doubling the American commitment since President Obama had assumed power. His predecessor, the sacked General McKiernan, must have allowed himself a smile. For Americans, this had uncomfortable parallels with 'escalation' and Westmoreland, and comparisons with the luckless Johnson presidency were made. Worse, McChrystal seemed to be cast as a MacArthur figure, throwing down a gauntlet to his political masters (in fact, McChrystal's staffs were not the perpetrators of leaks). Defense Secretary Gates was moved to issue a public rebuke, and the President was calculatingly photographed on Air Force One in private conversation with McChrystal (with whom he had only held one previous face-to-face conversation), en route to a failed attempt to bring the Olympic Games to Chicago. For Britain and other European allies this public discord was dismaying. If America cracked, Europe would fracture.

After two months of wrangling President Karzai was forced to concede that as many as one million votes cast in his favour were fraudulent and that he had not achieved the required 50 per cent majority. On 20 October, flanked by the Democrat senator John Kerry and by the American and British ambassadors, Karzai announced that a second round run-off would be organised. The date set for the run-off election was 7 November – ISAF and the electoral commission would have barely two weeks to organize this logistically challenging exercise. The strained jokes at the press conference barely disguised the animosity between President Karzai and his Western backers. In the event, the run-off was

cancelled. Faced with an impossible deadline, as well as a realization that the exercise would prove futile and not reverse the election results in any substantial way, the election was allowed to stand. A combination of massive fraud and Taliban intimidation had won the day.

For British infantrymen on the frontline, Afghanistan's political shenanigans were a remote concern. Nowhere was this truer than in Sangin where 2 Rifles was slugging it out with an implacable enemy. Over the course of their tour the riflemen had to deal with over 200 road side bombs.[857] A single rifleman was responsible for finding nineteen of these devices. Twenty-four soldiers in the 2 Rifles battlegroup were killed and a further eighty were seriously wounded. As many as one in five of the battlegroup sustained some sort of injury. These were Second World War casualty rates and they were just not sustainable. For the first time, the British were forced to send Battle Casualty Replacements (BCRs) to make up for the combat losses. In this case, a company from 3 Yorks (Duke of Wellington's Regiment) was dispatched at short notice from its base in Warminster. The Taliban did not have it all their way. Four bomb-making teams were killed, although this could only be counted as revenge because the bomb-making skills had proliferated.

The American journalist and ex-special forces soldier Michael Yon who spent a month with 2 Rifles over the course of that torrid summer vividly described the experiences of the soldiers caught, as he put it, in a 'daily struggle for tiny pieces of real estate'.[858] The picture he painted was bleak and honest. Despite the best efforts to apply a hearts and minds approach, Yon concluded that 'cooperation from locals is almost non-existent in many places', and interaction between the two sides 'nearly zero'.[859]

The madness that Sangin had become was illustrated by the experiences of Corporal Henry Sanday, one of several Fijians serving in 2 Rifles. In the early hours of the morning on 11 August, 2 Rifles began Operation Flint, a mission whose aim was to open an 800 meter road between FOB Jackson and PB Wishtan, to allow a resupply of the patrol base. Wishtan summed up everything that had gone wrong with the British presence in Sangin. Nobody actually wanted this area of largely deserted compounds, the size of about half a dozen football pitches, and it had become a lethal no-man's land. The high compound walls and numerous alleyways created a perfect environment for the insurgents to lay numerous traps with IEDs, without being observed. For the British it was imperative that a resupply route be kept open to the isolated patrol base and that route was the notorious Pharmacy Road, in fact no more than a wide dirt track. Scores of IEDs would be laid in the vicinity of Pharmacy Road and 2 Rifles would eventually suffer twenty casualties in

Wishtan just trying to keep the lifeline open. It was probably not an exaggeration to state that Pharmacy Road became the most dangerous road in the world in the summer of 2009.

A low point was experienced on 10 July in an incident that effectively wiped out a platoon. Three sections had set off down the Wishtan bazaar road to rendezvous with an ANA platoon. The lead Vallon men continually received double-tone warnings indicating the presence of IEDs so it was decided to take an alternative route through a compound. This compound had also been laced with IEDs. A rifleman inadvertently set off an IED that killed him and severely wounded six other soldiers. Among the casualties were the company commander and platoon commander. The first proposed emergency helicopter landing site proved unfeasible because of the large number of IEDs so eventually it was decided that everyone should make their way back to PB Wishtan, divided into three groups, and each carrying casualties. One of these groups set off another IED, killing four riflemen and wounding several more. Three teenagers were among the dead: Riflemen William Aldridge, James Backhouse, and Joseph Murphy.

The Commanding Officer remained defiant in the face of these losses:

'It has been a grim day here in Sangin …the Bugle Major sounded the advance and it would have been heard right across the valley as the sun slipped behind the ridge. We turned to our right, saluted the fallen and the wounded, picked up our rifles and returned to the ramparts.'[860]

But what the British were achieving by basing themselves in the middle of this death trap was an open question. The majority of locals had long fled the area. To avoid the IEDs the soldiers took to 'grand nationaling' (after the steeplechase race) – using ladders to cross-grain the area by climbing over the compound walls and thus avoiding the tracks. It was quite insane: the soldiers were being forced to keep their feet off the very earth they were supposed to be claiming. On occasions 'grand-nationaling' was not possible, either because the compound walls were too high, or because the loads the soldiers carrying were too heavy, or because vehicles had to be used to carry stocks. Then the riflemen, with a predictable inevitability, struck IEDs.

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Operation Flint took two days to complete. Almost 200 men were needed to secure the short stretch of road. It was conducted in 50 degrees heat and the soldiers were carrying in excess of sixty pounds of equipment. The counter-IED teams led by Staff Sergeant Olaf Schmid who would later be killed by an IED, spent twenty-two hours clearing IEDs from

the Pharmacy Road. By the end of the operation they had uncovered thirty-one – a record for one day. One of the British armoured tractors ran over an IED and had to be abandoned. The following day a curious local went to investigate and was killed by a Taliban booby trap. The following day a second local was killed when he used a parallel route which he believed had been cleared by the British. This highlighted the danger that only a proportion of the roadside bombs had been found. Many more were still buried somewhere in the warren of alleys, waiting for victims.

Sanday and his men left their patrol base early on the morning of 13 August, the day after Operation Flint had been officially closed. At just before 5.30am they struck an IED that wounded Lance-Bombardier Matthew Hatton and two others. Captain Mark Hale and Rifleman Daniel Wild went forward to help the injured Hatton, and they inadvertently set off another IED, killing all three men. Sanday now had five casualties on his hands. The forty-three year-old Hale had served in the army since the age of sixteen when he joined up as boy soldier. The youngest fatality, Daniel Wild, was just nineteen. In the previous year he had ironically been prevented from deploying to Kosovo, on the grounds of his age. Now he had come of age and death had come to him. Faced with the probability that the entire area was seeded with IEDs, Sanday tried to get the medevac helicopter (in this case an American Pedro) to land on a roof but this proved impossible. Eventually, a landing site was found and the three dead and two wounded soldiers were extracted.

Sanday, who was the acting platoon sergeant, then had to pick up the pieces of his shaken patrol and continue with the task. What followed is best described in Yon's candid words:

'Later that evening, when the mission had been completed and the soldiers were moving back to FOB Jackson, they were hit by a third bomb leaving two casualties. Sanday was setting up another helicopter extraction when a fourth bomb detonated and an interpreter turned into a 'white mist' leaving only a leg … Sanday was down to four unwounded soldiers in his section and in Sangin the IEDs often seem come in big clusters. No matter which way you go, there is a high probability of more. Two interpreters were killed in the strike and three [soldiers] were wounded. Some of the men were in shock and did not react to Sanday's commands. They were seriously battle-affected and refusing orders…'

The body of the interpreter who disappeared was eventually found twenty miles away floating in the Helmand River.

Sanday's trial was not yet over. The following morning he set off again to support a

second operation to clear Route Sparta – a 700 meter stretch of track that connected FOB Jackson with PB Nolay, held by the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers. Eventually twenty-one IEDs would be discovered on this track. He had not patrolled long when an IED detonated 100 metres in front of him, killing three fusiliers. While setting up the helicopter extraction another soldier stepped on an IED causing further casualties. Over the course of twenty-four hours Sanday witnessed the deaths of six soldiers and two interpreters. He also witnessed multiple traumatic amputations and had to deal with soldiers on the edge of nervous breakdowns. This was not an extraordinary sequence of events. This was Sangin every other week.

Immediately north and south of Sangin, little had changed since 2 Para fought their bitter battles in the previous summer. The Officer Commanding B Company of 2 Rifles based at FOB Inkerman likened his company to ‘a big block of cheese’. Every day his men set out and patrolled the Green Zone, and every day the Taliban watched and waited.

‘Once they are confident that they are in a safe position, especially with adequate safe routes to extract, they open up on us with everything they have got. It is very difficult to see the insurgents before the contact because of the thickness of the vegetation, the numerous compounds and rat runs all provide ample cover from view. At this stage, the mouse has the upper hand but not for long.’

The British response was always over-whelming firepower and more destruction:

‘Once the firing points have been located, the Company puts down a staggering amount of small arms fire which results in the suppression of their firing points. We then set about trapping the mouse with artillery and mortars, using aircraft and attack.’[861]

These daily skirmishes achieved nothing. Once the dust settled and the frontline had coagulated again, both sides re-supplied their ammunition stocks and prepared for another round of confrontation. The officer commanding FOB Inkerman was putting a brave face on a dire situation. Remarkably, every Rifles patrol that stepped out of FOB Inkerman that summer was attacked by gunmen, without exception. The local villagers could not have sent the British a more explicit message – clear off. The density of IEDs meant that patrols could no longer fire and manoeuvre, which was why the riflemen resorted to calling in artillery fire or aircraft support. Every patrol had to follow ‘the Afghan Snake’, or march in single file behind the Vallon men. The fear of IEDs was so great that even when under fire individual soldiers elected to remain where they were and take their chances, rather than risk diving for cover and setting off an IED. The loads carried by some soldiers were

so great that if they got down, they struggled to get up again. Despite the array of surveillance technologies ranged against the insurgents, the riflemen discovered that it was very hard to spot the gunmen at the height of the summer, hidden in dense vegetation or behind head-height crops. In the previous year the paratroopers had been able to reach the banks of the Helmand River from FOB Inkerman. The Rifles could not extend their presence further than the weapon range of the sangar sentries. The frontline was retracting, not expanding. By the time B Company quit the base, IEDs were being laid within 200 metres of the front gate (which resulted in multiple amputations to two soldiers in separate incidents). The isolated soldiers at FOB Inkerman, three years into the war, were also still fighting battles on other fronts as well. On one occasion, due to poor logistic planning, the company ate nothing but ration pack Menu B for an entire month. By the end of the tour the average rifleman had shed about an eighth of his body weight.

This same pattern was repeated even in areas considered a ‘success story’, such as PB Shahzad held by Prince of Wales’s Company of the Welsh Guards. The guardsmen did win ‘hearts and minds’ at their base at Chah-e-Anjir, but it counted for little. Over a three month period they were attacked 140 times. Every attack took place within half a kilometre of the town centre, and the majority within 200 metres.[862] It was a siege situation however hard a propaganda machine tried to suggest that progress was being made.

Fighting in the Green Zone remained as treacherous as ever. In late August, call sign Hades 50 Bravo set off to patrol as usual in an area south of Sangin. One of the patrol’s tasks was to question and if necessary arrest some off-duty ANP who were believed to be acting corruptly, an indication of the little confidence the British enjoyed in the ANP in Sangin, three years after taking over the District Centre. The patrol passed without incident and the soldiers were retracing their way back to the patrol base, avoiding tracks for fear of IEDs. As they approached a tree line the lead Vallon man detected an IED. After searching the area carefully, a further two IEDs were discovered. Recently, insurgents had begun seeding tree and hedge lines with IEDs to catch out patrols following cross-country routes. Relieved that they had not fallen victim to this trap, the soldiers withdrew to the cover of a nearby wall that enclosed an orchard. In this situation, the drill was to place a ladder man on the wall to observe the blind side. The patrol had barely sat down when a grenade taped to an RPG warhead flew over the wall. This was followed by two more grenades. In a matter of seconds eight soldiers were caught by the blasts, including the patrol commander and patrol medic. One of the most gravely injured

soldiers was Corporal Mather, an Army Air Corps JTAC (Joint Tactical Air Controller). The patrol was now in serious jeopardy and needed air cover to extract itself. Mather was the only soldier with the skills and the radio to make the vital link, first with an American A-10, and then with the MERT helicopter, inbound from Camp Bastion. The A-10 conducted a strafing run against the orchard, controlled by Corporal Mather lying on his stretcher, which allowed the soldiers to escape south towards the designated emergency helicopter landing site (EHLS). As a result of a series of misunderstandings, the MERT helicopter took four attempts to find the EHLS. All this time Mather continued to control the aircraft despite the seriousness of his wounds. The radio was only finally ripped from his hands when he was loaded onboard the Chinook. Mather was awarded the Military Cross for this exemplary conduct and he was not the only soldier to demonstrate resolution. Both the section commander and patrol medic refused to be evacuated despite their wounds.

In early June, a 2 Rifles patrol stepped out of FOB Gibraltar led by Lieutenant Paul Mervis. Mervis was typical of the changing demography in the British Army. He was an academically-gifted child from a middle-class background who read philosophy at university. Before joining the army he had travelled widely and worked for *The Spectator*. He may have not been the most military of officers but he was greatly loved by his soldiers. That morning, as soon as the riflemen began to patrol, the platoon sensed there would be trouble. Farmers working the fields began to scurry back to their compounds and ICOM chatter ceased, a sure sign that an ambush was about to be sprung. To pre-empt the insurgents Mervis ordered his section to occupy a compound from which the soldiers would be able to enjoy a dominating position over the fields. The compound was entered through a side gate after carefully sweeping for IEDs. Two Vallon men then began to sweep the roof where the section intended to take up fire positions. They completed their sweep, found nothing, and the rest of the section was called to the roof. The section commander then made one last check before Mervis and the GPMG gunner moved to occupy a corner of the roof. As the GPMG gunner laid his gun down there was an explosion that collapsed the roof. Mervis, who was closest to the IED, was mortally wounded by the bomb and a second soldier was injured. The section had done everything right and had still been caught out. The C Company sergeant major later wrote of the young officer: ‘I have never met, nor am I likely to meet, a man who cared so much about his men’.

FOB Nolay, south of Sangin, where A Company of 2 RRF was based, found that gaining the trust of the locals was a painfully slow process. Small acts of spontaneous

kindness by soldiers helped but could not overcome Taliban intimidation. When Colour Sergeant Jackson noticed that a local shopkeeper was struggling with an old wheelchair, he enterprisingly ‘liberated’ a wheelchair from the hospital at Camp Bastion. The man would not forget the British strangers who appeared at his shop one day to present him with a brand new wheelchair, but these human gestures made little difference to the overall mood around FOB Nolay which remained hostile to the soldiers.

Far to the north in Musa Qaleh, where the remainder of the Fusiliers battlegroup was based, with C Company in the District Centre and B Company in PB Woqab, the soldiers found the same levels of indifference, fear and hostility. The Gurkhas who preceded the Fusiliers had expanded the security bubble around the town with the Mar Nonu sequence of operations. The Fusiliers would continue this tactic of incremental land grabs over the course of their six month tour.

The first such operation was Mar Lewe (‘Snake Wolf’) which kicked off in the early hours of the morning on 29 May. The aim of the operation was to seize the village of Yatimchay, just six kilometres south of Musa Qaleh, which had become a safe haven for insurgents attacking the southern patrol bases. This village was also the home of one of the district’s more prominent narcotics barons who lived in style in a villa easily recognisable by the garish ‘narco-tecture’ style so beloved of Helmand’s crooks. The operation was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Charlie Calder and included ANA mentored by D Company from the Black Watch. With the Fusiliers’ C Company mentoring the police, reinforcements were provided by C Company from 2 Royal Welsh and the Brigade Reconnaissance Force.

The plan was straightforward: the flanks were blocked and B Company of the Fusiliers, supported by the ANA, made a lunge for the village. The overwhelming show of force deterred the insurgents and there was little resistance. The operation was not, however, without cost. On the second day a Jackal crewed the Brigade Reconnaissance Force ran over a large IED killing two crew members, Lance Corporal Nigel Moffett of the Light Dragoons, and Corporal Stephen Bolger of the Parachute Regiment. Moffett was typical of his generation: in six years he had already completed two tours of Iraq and this was his second tour of Afghanistan when his luck dried up. Britain’s down-sized army was recycling its combat soldiers on the frontline at a rate that increased the probability of eventual injury or death.

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Following the first Mar Lewe, British resources were all committed to supporting

Operation Panchai Palang so the Fusiliers were unable to mount a another operation for two months. Operation Mar Lewe 2 finally took place on 10 August, following the conclusion of this larger operation, and had the modest aim of pushing the front line back a further kilometre south of Musa Qaleh. At the conclusion of the operation a further two patrol bases were built to dominate the newly won ground.

The operation was conducted in three phases with the villages of Sharmush Shila and Deh Zohr-e Sofla as their objectives (the latter was the village where Green Berets and the Green Howards had accidentally killed a family when Musa Qaleh was retaken in 2007). These sat on the western bank of the Musa Qaleh River, barely five kilometres from the District Centre, and had been repeatedly used by insurgents to interdict resupply convoys arriving from Camp Bastion across the desert routes. At just before midnight on 9 August a 122 strong C Company set off from the District Centre to begin its approach march towards the objectives. In addition to the Fusiliers, C Company was reinforced by a platoon from B Company 2 Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment; the Fusiliers' reconnaissance platoon mounted in Jackals; three Mastiffs to provide fire support; three Fire Support Teams; Royal Engineers to clear IEDs; and a dozen Afghan soldiers and policeman. By about 2.30am the Mastiffs and Jackals had reached their fire positions on high ground immediately east of the villages and were overlooking the area. Two hours later the heavily laden infantrymen arrived at their line of departure in the cover of the Farhad Mandah Wadi. From here the distance to the villages was less than one kilometre across open ground and it was clear that local gunmen had been alerted to the presence of the force. At H-Hour, just before dawn, the Fusiliers began their advance into Sharmush Shila, the nearest of the two villages, and quickly secured the objective. The Mastiffs were then moved to high ground to cover the company as it set about clearing compounds. The insurgents responded with surprisingly accurate mortar fire sending members of 9 Platoon diving for cover wherever they could find it. The clearance of the two villages took all day and it was not until the late afternoon that the ANA contingent was able to occupy two compounds designated as patrol bases, alongside their mentors from the Black Watch.

Securing the compounds to allow the engineers to build defences was the first phase of the operation. In the second phase, an American counter-IED team, Task Force Thor, cleared the route to the new bases along the main track leading from the District Centre. This route was heavily seeded with IEDs and the clearance operation lasted several days. The final phase of the operation was concluded by 31 August with the completion of PB Talibjan and CP Mohib by Royal Engineers. To impress on their charges the importance of

the new bases, the commander of the Musa Qaleh ANA and commander of the ANA 3rd Kandak were invited to officially open the bases.

The locals, as commonly happened in the aftermath of such operations, roundly denounced the Taliban and claimed to be happy with the presence of security forces but it was not long before the fighting resumed again. As one cynical Fusilier officer observed:

'The population of DZO (Deh Zohr Olya - the village in question) win the Afghan Collective Liars award for claiming vociferously that they know nothing about the enemy, or IEDs. This was proved conclusively to be rubbish when, a couple of hours after we left the village, one of the 'innocent population' accidentally set off the IED he was laying on the track that we had just used.'[863]

At PB Talibjan the fighting barely paused and the ANA were under constant small arms and mortar attacks, day and night, from the south and south-east. CP Mohib, the more vulnerable of the two bases, also came under attack and on 17 August the Taliban succeeded in killing a policeman manning this base. It was clear that the insurgents had simply been displaced to the village of Ahmad Khwazi, about two kilometres to the east, and were now using this new sanctuary to attack the newly-built bases. Unwilling to tolerate this provocation, the Fusiliers had little choice but to mount another operation to clear the insurgents from Ahmad Khawzi.

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Operation Mar Zina was launched on 18 August and focused on two objectives at the southern end of the village, Silver and Gold, which had been identified as Taliban compounds. The plan for Mar Zina involved two phases: in the first phase the ANA 3rd Company mentored by a British team would advance from the north to distract the Taliban; and in the second phase, a Fusilier heavy weapons platoon, supported by a platoon from PB Minden mounted in Warriors, would cross the Musa Qaleh River and set up blocking positions in the south.

The ANA 3rd Company set off from the District Centre and entered the village at about 8am and soon found itself embroiled in a gun fight in the course of which the Afghan company commander lost control of his troops. The British mentoring team managed to restore some semblance of order when two gunmen were spotted moving south through the village. In their enthusiasm the ANA gave hot pursuit and bounced into two insurgent positions at Objective Silver. A second gun battle ensued. Finally, the position was cleared with grenades, one of which started a fire that detonated a cache of ammunition and

explosives, fortunately without causing casualties.

With Objective Silver cleared the company re-orientated itself and began to advance on Objective Gold, a series of compounds about 450 metres to the south across an area of dead ground flanked by maize fields. As with the previous objective, Gold was overwhelmed by volleys of small arms fire and shoulder-launched rockets. When the smoke cleared the soldiers found 500 kilograms of ammonium nitrate and components to make IEDs.

The insurgents so far had proved elusive but they were plainly annoyed at the loss of their two caches, subjecting 3rd Company to a massive barrage of fire from the south. Unable to spot the insurgent firing positions from the blocking position the Fusiliers heavy weapons platoon moved north and in the gunfight that followed a policeman and insurgent were killed. The problem now facing the ANA advancing from the north was that the insurgents had taken cover in a line of *qanats* (underground aquifers), and these were being used as a trench line. Spotting where the fire was coming from was proving difficult and hitting the elusive gunmen even harder. By a process of slow, methodical clearances the insurgents were squeezed into a box and finally assaulted at close range with hand grenades. As many as ten fighters were killed and three were taken prisoner – a rare catch.

Having cleared the final position the companies withdrew to their respective bases with the Fusiliers taking custody of the prisoners (leaving these hapless individuals in the hands of the ANA would have almost certainly signed their death warrants). At this stage the mood was buoyant. An insurgent gang that had been responsible for repeated attacks against bases south of Musa Qaleh over the last two weeks had been eliminated in one operation. This mood turned to surprise when an hour later – en route back to PB Talibjan – the ANA and accompanying British mentors found themselves caught in a three-way ambush. In the ensuing gun battle Lance Bombardier Greening, a signaller, was struck in the back by a round that penetrated his rucksack but was stopped by the plate on his body armour. Short of ammunition and with the initiative in the hands of the insurgents the ANA withdrew covered by a smoke screen fired by guns at FOB Edinburgh. It was a reminder to everyone that even when the Taliban were apparently beaten, they were still capable of hitting back. For the rest of the week the area remained pacified as the insurgents counted their losses. Then the fighting resumed again. The three prisoners whose lives were almost certainly saved by the British enjoyed a double break. Lacking sufficient evidence to mount a prosecution, or perhaps as a result of a bribe, they were released by the corrupt ANP.[864]

Like the Gurkhas before them the Fusiliers would look back on their tour of Musa Qaleh with the satisfaction that the security bubble had been expanded and consolidated. It was true that the frontline had expanded outwards, but it remained a permeable skin.

The experiences of 7 Platoon at PB Woqab were typical of the daily routine of fruitless skirmishes across no man's land. From June to August the platoon was under daily attacks from concealed insurgent firing positions. There was no follow-up to these attacks because the platoon was under-manned and dared not risk being ambushed.

This rule was broken in late July when a sangar sentry reported that an enemy machine gunner had been hit in a hedge line about 500 metres north of the base. As in almost all such cases, this was a speculative and optimistic call. The fact was that the British were firing tens of thousands of rounds from patrol bases and hitting nothing. The base platoon commander nonetheless took a decision to search the hedge line with two sections. Due to the continuing manpower shortages this was the largest-sized force the patrol base could afford to release. What followed was a predictable sequence of events which had been replayed countless times in the Green Zone over the last three years. There was no dead Taliban machine gunner, but there were gunmen out there who quickly set up an ambush and caught one of the sections in the open. Overwhelmed by the weight of small arms fire and unable to manoeuvre because of the weights they were carrying, the soldiers fell back on the staple British response – even heavier retaliatory firepower. The Light Gun perched on Roshan Tower joined in the scrap. Mortar missions were called. Eventually an aircraft was tasked to drop a bomb on the suspected enemy firing points. To the young lieutenant's amazement, none of this stopped the enemy fire which only died off once the soldiers had retreated back to PB Woqab and closed the door behind them. Probably every patrol base commander in Helmand that summer, without exception, could have related such a story.

Holding this frontline did not come cheaply in lives or bullets. Seven fusiliers lost their lives, including three on a single day. Many more were terribly injured, a toll which included numerous amputees. The three Fusiliers killed in the single incident were Lance Corporal James Fullarton, Fusilier Simon Annis and Fusilier Louis Carter. The mother of Fusilier Annis – Ann Annis - would later write a poignant tribute to her son, *Butterflies and Feathers*, a counterpoint to the industrial output of *Bravo Two Zero*-style books that the war was beginning to generate. Her book opened a door to the very real and lifelong emotional war the relatives of the bereaved faced. Typically, the three fusiliers were killed by an IED in Sangin. Two of the soldiers were teenagers. Carter had only passed out of the Army's Infantry Training Centre at Catterick that summer. He joined his regiment and

then immediately lost his life stepping on a second IED while trying to save his section commander who had been mortally wounded by an initial explosion. Ann Annis's book would be followed by Dr Margaret Evison's *Death of Soldier.* Her son, the handsome and charismatic Lieutenant Mark Evison, was shot and killed by Kharotei tribesmen near a village called Noor Mohammed Kalay, in Nad-e Ali (subsequent investigation suggested that he may have been killed by friendly fire from one of the GPMGs firing from the patrol base).[865] Thanks to the proliferation of combat cameras, the last hour of his life was captured, and with it the controversy over his death and delayed evacuation. Why did it take the mother of a fallen soldier to make the obvious and honest observation? 'It was a war very slow in its winning,' Margaret Evison wrote, 'if it was being won at all'.[866]

The bullets, unlike the lives, were expendable, and as far as the soldiers were concerned the more they fired off, the better. The Fire Support Group based at the Roshan Tower reckoned that by the time they packed their bags and handed over to the incoming brigade they had launched £1.75 million's worth of Javelin missiles, or about 10 per cent of the British reconstruction budget in Helmand since operations began in 2006 (by December 2009, the MOD was obliged to order an additional 1,300 Javelin missiles to replace expended stocks).[867]

If the Rifles and the Fusiliers could reflect on a bitter and bloody summer, the Black Watch experienced a very different tour. Other than D Company that was deployed in support of the 2 RRF battlegroup in Musa Qaleh, the remainder of the battalion was based at Kandahar as the Regional Battlegroup (South) supporting operations in both Kandahar and Helmand provinces.

The day after formally taking over from 42 Commando, A Company, commanded by Major Matt Munro, was collected by helicopters and dropped off near a suspected Taliban-dominated village called Nasser in Kandahar province (Operation Tyruna 1A).[868] In the resultant thirty-six hour operation the Jocks uncovered small caches of anti-personnel mines, mortars and rocket propelled grenades. The operation was mostly remembered for 'two incredible storms' that tested the endurance of soldiers who had left behind warm clothing and sleeping bags to reduce the weight of their packs.[869] This was followed by Operation Sarak 1, a six day surge in the area of Band-e Timor which yielded nothing of significance. The biggest challenges were the extreme weights carried by the soldiers and the weather: four soldiers were evacuated with back injuries, two from heat exhaustion, and one with torn ligaments.[870] This was followed by Sarak 3, a Soviet-style operation to

clear insurgents away from Highway 1 and Route 601. It proved as forlorn. Ambushing road travellers was national sport across Central Asia and Highway 1 would continue to suffer attacks for the remainder of the war. Most of the fighting centred on an area called Yakchal, which the British would still be contesting three years later. Over the course of the operation the Jocks confiscated a hoard of over 7 million Afghanis (£140,000). For the British this was drug money. For villagers it was not unlikely this stash was part of a nexus of credits and debits on which their livelihoods depended.

The first major operation undertaken by the Black Watch in Helmand was Operation Ouba 3, a drug-busting raid conducted in the Upper Sangin Valley in the first week of June. A total of 450 soldiers were involved in this two phase operation, as well as over 100 ANA. B Company led the operation, supported by the ANA contingent. The first phase targeted predominantly Alizai villages ten kilometres south of Kajaki: Sar Puzay, Nangazi, and Barakzai (an area of operations known as ‘Black Rock’). The second targeted ‘Brown Rock’, another seven kilometres further south, which included the villages of Chahardah and Bustanzay. The combined forces were inserted by helicopter, at night, in the vicinity of suspected drug laboratories. As the marines had discovered on Operation Diesel in the previous year, the narcotics traffickers and their insurgent guards did not surrender these laboratories lightly. In the ensuing gunfights the soldiers were subjected to accurate machine gun fire and volleys of RPGs. B Company was pinned down for eleven hours. At one stage, a casualty evacuation helicopter was narrowly missed by an RPG, forcing the pilot to abandon the mission (of the two British Chinooks that attempted the evacuation, one was shot twenty-six times, and the second returned home on one engine).[871] The stiff resistance was compounded by temperatures that reached 45 degrees.

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Operation Ouba 3 was the largest British-led counter-narcotics raid to date. Ten laboratories were uncovered and destroyed, which the battlegroup reckoned amounted to 15 per cent of the narcotic processing capability in the Upper Sangin Valley.[872] More than 5,000 kilograms of opium paste was also destroyed. Other items discovered included 220 kilograms of morphine, 60 kilograms of heroin, 148 kilograms of cannabis, 5,800 kilograms of ammonium chloride, and 2,500 kilograms of sulphur. Eight AK-47 machine guns and three pistols were also recovered.[873] The air support for this operation had come from American F-18s operating from the USS *Eisenhower* in the Indian Ocean, demonstrating the impressive reach of the US Navy’s air wing.

In mid-June, it was once again the turn of the battlegroup to undertake a raid against a suspected Taliban weapon and drugs cache as part of a wider disruption effort prior to the Afghan National Elections.[874] Operation Tora Arwa was mounted on 10 June and eventually lasted six days. The Jocks were airlifted to the target area in Zhari District in six Canadian Chinooks, supported by American fighters. This was an area known as 'the heart of darkness' and indeed ISAF would never succeed in pacifying the tribes in Zhari. The intense gun battle that followed lasted for several hours before the superior firepower of the Jocks forced the insurgents to retreat from their positions. At one point, the insurgents lobbed Chinese rockets at the Jocks. One platoon commander described it as 'the most terrifying firework display I've ever been [to]'.[875] Numerous weapons were found as well as 118 kilograms of wet opium, 190 kilograms of marijuana and over 100 kilograms of marijuana seeds. The marijuana finds in this and previous raids pointed to a new trend. By the subsequent year marijuana would be competing with the opium poppy as farmers in south-west Afghanistan sought to diversify their income streams. The fighting was mostly concluded when Private Robert McLaren, a boy from Kintra on the Isle of Mull, was killed after stepping on an IED. McLaren, who had passed out of basic training in April, was the first fatality experienced by the Black Watch battlegroup since the start of operations two months earlier. A mobile rather than static approach to counter-insurgency was demonstrably costing fewer lives.

On 7 August the Black Watch once again returned to Sangin district. In this operation – Tyruna 2B – the target was an insurgent stronghold in the village of Malmand Chinah in Ghowrak District. As in the previous operations, the insurgents were overcome by sheer numbers and surprise. An armada of nine Chinooks (Canadian and British), three Black Hawks, two Sea Kings, and four Apache flying as escorts dropped off over 300 soldiers in the desert east of their objective. After a short but intense gun battle in which seven insurgents were believed to have been killed the Jocks secured the suspect compounds. The haul in this operation was insignificant – just 250 kilograms of wet opium – but the message that was being sent to the drug traffickers was equally important. ISAF had the capacity and the willingness to target drug laboratories anywhere in the region.

Following Operation Panchai Palang, A Company was redeployed to Helmand to act as the security force for the construction of a police checkpoint (where Birchall's IX Company had wrestled with armed gangs over control for the village of Basharan). Unlike previous missions, Operation Zafar involved an eighty kilometre road move in a sixty vehicle convoy with the soldiers riding in newly arrived Mastiff 2 vehicles. To avoid

likely ambush positions a circuitous route was selected that in the end proved unworkable with vehicles becoming stuck in deep sand. Eventually the convoy passed through Lashkar Gah, an experience described as ‘Piccadilly Circus on speed’, before traveling the last ten kilometres through Green Zone, a journey that took a further grueling fourteen hours. In Helmand, time and distance were never what they seemed. The checkpoint was successfully completed but as commonly happened at the conclusion of such operations the locals laid roadside bombs to catch the withdrawing troops. One Mastiff ran over an IED breaking the driver’s ankle but causing no other serious injuries. The robustness of the vehicle impressed the Jocks – the IED was so large, observers recalled the vehicle completely vanishing in a cloud of dust and smoke.

More operations followed through a broiling August: Tyruna 2C in Panjwahi District (14-15 August); Aabi Toorha, providing security for the elections (16-23 August); Tor Shakatcha, which cost the lives of Sergeant Gus Millar and Private Kevin Elliott (29 August – 2 September); and Burs Simi, in the Upper Gereshk Valley (5-7 September).

On 14 September the Black Watch mounted another night heliborne raid, on this occasion against a well-known Taliban stronghold in Howz-e-Maded, in eastern Kandahar province. This was another attempt to clear insurgents away from Highway 1. This redoubt had been a scene of fighting in the past and still bore the scars of gun battles. To achieve surprise the soldiers landed in three waves of six Chinooks in the middle of the insurgent position. Overhead, fighters and attack helicopters supported the ground troops, neutralizing suspected enemy firing positions with cannon and rocket fire. The plan for the operation was kept deliberately simple: A Company would secure the Taliban stronghold and clear the first wadi; B Company would clear identified enemy defensive positions in a second wadi north of the stronghold; and C (Support) Company would block any Taliban reinforcements from the north. What the companies uncovered, as the operation unfolded, surprised the Jocks.

B Company found itself skirmishing through three defensive lines across the wadi. These comprised of trenches, underground bunkers, underground tunnels and rat runs. Sniper positions had been dug at the rear of the defensive lines and there were IEDs everywhere. It was like assaulting the defensive positions of an organized, conventional army, not an insurgent force. Faced with overwhelming firepower the insurgents mostly chose to run rather than fight. Some, however, did not, and this provoked acts of bravery. In one incident, a section commander crawled across open ground to a hut in which a Taliban machine gun crew was raking an A Company position. He succeeded in reaching

the hut undetected and posted two grenades through the door, killing both insurgents.

A Company's finds were no less surprising: two motorcycles already primed for suicide attacks, ammunition, bomb-making equipment, weapons and radios. A rare and pristine AGS-17 grenade launcher and 82mm recoilless rifle were also recovered. The state of the latter weapon suggested that it was not a vintage arm from the Soviet period, but rather a new weapon supplied almost certainly from Pakistan. Overall, the operation had managed to disrupt an organized and well-resourced Taliban group. Over the next two days running gunfights continued as the Black Watch continued to search the area, uncovering more IEDs and war materiel. One young NCO, Corporal Tam Mason was grievously injured by an IED, the Black Watch's last significant casualty in an otherwise successful last foray into the Taliban heartlands of Kandahar Province. Mason would succumb to his wounds six weeks later.

The last major operation undertaken by the Black Watch, in early October, was Operation Mar Zay.[876] The target in this case was the notorious Lakari bazaar in Garmsir district, an area now controlled by US marines. Accordingly, the 300 strong raiding force was transported in American helicopters, protected by marine Cobras and Harriers. There was little resistance at first and the soldiers were soon making finds. At the western end of the bazaar, bomb-making equipment was uncovered ranging from pressure pads to detonators. The latter had almost certainly arrived at Lakari from across the border in Pakistan. Large quantities of precursor chemicals, wet opium, and a block of hashish 'the size of a football' were also uncovered. As 7 Platoon continued their search, a group of eight insurgents began to approach the bazaar from the south, unaware that they had been spotted by a circling UAV. Believing themselves to be safe they were walking openly, with their weapons, along the line of the canal. Black Watch snipers waited until they were comfortably in range then opened fire, killing a number and scattering the remainder. To the west, 5 Platoon had been under intermittent gunfire all day. Eventually a Predator UAV dropped a 500 pound bomb on the suspected insurgent firing point, but this proved a dud. Shortly afterwards, a Hellfire missile launched at the same point finally silenced the insurgents. The total haul included: 'Illegal uniforms, machine gun ammunition, mortar ammunition, IED batteries, command wires, detonators and switches, and a large amount of drugs including 1.5 tons of hashish as well as multiple smaller finds of wet opium'.[877]

It was not all operations for the soldiers based at Kandahar. Unlike their colleagues based in Helmand, the airbase not only boasted restaurants and coffee houses, but also hosted shows, recalling the entertainment that was laid on for soldiers during the Second

World War. One soldier serving with A Company remembered with particular fondness the arrival of an obscure popular band called Electric Mayhem, but not for the music:

'There is no doubt that for many the highlight of the week was the arrival of the Combined Services Entertainment (CSE) show… A stone cold sober and male dominated audience cannot be every rockers [sic] dream, but to their credit they worked the crowd to as much of a frenzy as you can, particularly when the show was halted midway through by a rocket attack. There was, however, one particular aspect that may have been mostly responsible for the charged atmosphere and that was CSE dancers. With three very tantalising young girls wearing the absolute minimum and flaunting themselves on stage, it is not wholly surprising the show was a success with the jocks.'[878]

The soldier did not record whether Afghans at the base stole a peek at this display of Western degeneracy.

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Despite the torrid summer fighting season and heavy casualties 19 Light Brigade was not a wholly exhausted formation. On 16 September, 2 Rifles mounted Operation Ghartse Breshna 3, a counter-narcotics raid on the village of Wushtan, about fifteen kilometres east of Sangin. Wushtan was too distant from the Helmand River to benefit from irrigation channels and relied for its water supply on the seasonal flows from the De Ghorak Mandah, a shallow wadi, as well as on aquifers. Nearby was the village of Iskander, quite probably named after Alexander the Great. The poor soil encouraged the cultivation of the opium poppy. One company of riflemen was inserted by three Chinooks on the outskirts of the village shortly after first light. A gang of local armed men who gathered to challenge the soldiers was swiftly dispersed by Apache. Following this action there was no resistance. The soldiers soon began to uncover evidence of opium processing, eventually seizing 331 kilograms of opium and 135 kilograms of poppy seeds. This haul represented about £13,000 pounds' worth of revenue in the local currency – or sufficient income to tide the farmers in Wushtan over the winter months. Locals claimed that forty-five children had been forced to work in the opium laboratories by the Taliban but this was a well-worn excuse used to deflect arrests of adult males. The unfortunate fact was that every family in Wushtan was involved directly or indirectly in the narcotics trade and the raid had deprived the village of vital income. Without alternative livelihoods, a counter-narcotics raid like this on an isolated and poor village risked creating more enemies and throwing more families into penury. Rifleman Gradidge, who took part in the operation, was subsequently quoted in a propaganda piece for a MOD magazine, saying: 'It's good to

see that we are doing something positive for the local Afghans'.[879] Nothing could have been further from the truth.

If 19 Light Brigade could claim that the fighting campaign, though bloody, had achieved its aims by the beginning of the autumn, how was the wider British campaign faring? The human cost over the summer had been high. Seventy-six soldiers were killed (fifty-four from IEDs), and 340 wounded in action. Thirty more amputees were added to the roll call of Britain's war maimed. FOB Gibraltar was abandoned, a base which had cost eleven British lives. Several hundred insurgents were claimed to have been killed or wounded and the brigade admitted the accidental deaths of as many as twenty civilians (overwhelmingly by air strikes). A measure of the mismatch between the local fighters and the task force can be gauged from the number of gun battles. The brigade reported 1,990 but these only resulted in the deaths of four British soldiers. The villagers were firing off thousands of rounds and completely failing to hit anyone. Reportedly, Task Force 42, the British special force contingent, had accounted for 65 of 240 insurgent leaders on the 'kill or capture' list.[880] A snapshot of one battlegroup, the Welsh Guards, revealed the scale and nature of the fighting. Over the course of their tour this unit reported 1,463 gun fights and encountered 303 IEDs (of which ninety-six detonated); yet they suffered just sixteen fatalities. The battlegroup claimed to have killed 438 fighters (from a highly exaggerated brigade total claim of 3,100).[881] The brigade as a whole faced 1,780 IEDs, of which 571 detonated. This was a 300 per cent increase on the previous summer.[882]The persistant problem of exaggerated enemy kill counts was inexcusable. If the brigade had really killed over 3,000 insurgents, it would have reasonably expected, from historical norms, to have wounded three to four times as many insurgents. Over 10,000 injured males were not presenting themselves at Helmand's rudimentary clinics, or at the hospitals in Gereshk and Lashkar Gah. The numbers were plainly inflated.

The brigade had undertaken one major operation in an area it knew very little about, and then having fulfilled its part of the bargain could only watch as the political side of the bargain unravelled in corrupt elections. This was a grave setback but the British could at least claim they had now established a credible military hold on central Helmand. The arrival of a US marine task force was about to turn the British into junior partners but this suited all parties. Despite undeniable improvements in all areas of the British task force, old complaints continued to resurface. There were insufficient helicopters. The supply chain was slow and clogged. More funds were required for reconstruction and the release of these funds had to be quickened. The management of intelligence remained poor and its

dissemination a constant challenge. The brigade was effectively fixed and it lacked the capability to conduct mobile operations in the Green Zone. The Bowman radio system continued to be disliked and the ability to send secure data across networks remained limited. Soldiers were still being forced to carry loads that would break mules.

This larger and widely dispersed British task force implied a larger logistics bill. The brigade logistics infrastructure now encompassed over 3,000 military personnel, civilian contractors, and locally employed contractors, or LECs (Camp Bastion would eventually host as many as 10,000 civilian contractors). The camp had swelled to accommodate this increase in manpower and an Afghan shanty town had encrusted itself to the perimeter of the camp. The economic stimulus generated by this vast military hub almost certainly exceeded the plethora of reconstruction projects designed to create employment in Helmand. The logistics headquarters staffs, for example, were responsible for the 1,100 kilometre resupply route from Karachi. This was a road paved with gold for all the trucking companies that won contracts with the British Army, as well as for all the checkpoints, legal and illegal, that collected bribes to allow the trucks to pass. No British study was ever undertaken to determine how much money passed hands in bribes from the port of disembarkation in Karachi to Camp Bastion, but the figure would have been in the thousands of dollars per truck. Whatever else Operation Herrick was achieving, it was, without argument, a bonanza for Pakistani trucking mafias and parasitic militias and police forces that ‘secured’ the supply routes.

Within the theatre of operations the logistics staffs were responsible for about 10,300 military and civilian personnel, 1,550 vehicles and over 16,000 different weapon systems. [883] This implied holding front line stocks of 700,000 rations, 3 million litres of water, 4 million litres of fuel and 3,000 tonnes of ammunition. Roughly every ten days, a Combat Logistic Patrol (CLP) left the safety of Camp Bastion and snaked its way around the dispersed FOBs and patrol bases, distributing 350 tonnes of these supplies. It was a punishing schedule for men and machines, even without the threat of insurgent attacks. The vulnerability of the supply chain was a weakness which the insurgents tried to exploit, repeating the tactics of the mujahidin who targeted Russian convoys. The success rate of Taliban attacks on ISAF convoys was low, but occasional spectacular attacks could have far-reaching consequences. In July, a civilian Mi-26 resupply helicopter was shot down as it approached the District Centre at Sangin. The Eastern European crew were all killed, along with an Afghan girl on the ground. As a result of this successful shoot-down the use of ‘Jingly Air’ helicopters was revised and half of the British FOBs were deemed too

dangerous to accept these unprotected helicopters, adding more strain to the land resupply links. An attempt to use civilian convoys to resupply the Sangin area turned into a disaster. On the outward journey, three out of twenty-four construction store loads were lost to roadside bombs. On the return journey, with the insurgents now prepared and waiting, twenty trucks were lost in a well-coordinated ambush and ten civilian drivers were killed. [884] The experiment was not repeated.

The difficulties of moving anywhere freely in Helmand continued to hamper military operations. By 2009, the army had procured nearly 500 new protected vehicles for operations in Afghanistan. Only a proportion of these were actually deployed on the front line. The capacity of the army to receive, train on, and deploy new vehicles was being far outstripped by the rate at which the American manufacturers were supplying the units. There was no point transporting an upgraded Mastiff 2 to Helmand if the vehicle had not been fitted out with the correct equipment, if it lacked a trained driver, if there was no crew at the other end, or if the repair chain lacked the necessary spares. All these factors took time to resolve in an army that was 'running hot.' The lack of military helicopters, exacerbated by restrictions on the use of civilian helicopters, only made matters worse.

Over the summer, American journalist and former special forces soldier Michael Yon, spent several weeks embedded with 2 Rifles. The manner in which British forces had become effectively fixed by the threat of roadside bombs amazed this astute observer. In his words:

'Enemy control of the terrain is so complete in the area between Sangin and Kajaki that when my embed was to switch from FOB Jackson to FOB Inkerman - only seven kilometres (about four miles) away - we could not walk or drive from Jackson to Inkerman. Routes are deemed too dangerous. Helicopter lift was required. The helicopter shortage is causing crippling delays in troop movements. It's common to see a soldier waiting ten days for a simple flight. When my embed was to move the four miles from Jackson to Inkerman, a scheduled helicopter picked me up at Jackson and flew probably eighty miles to places like Lashkar Gah, and finally set down at Camp Bastion. The helicopter journey from Jackson began on 12 August and ended at Inkerman on the 17th. About five days was spent - along with many thousands of dollars in helicopter time - to travel four miles.'[885]

Yon's experience was not exceptional but rather the weekly reality for British soldiers serving in Helmand.

Protecting this enlarged force demanded mammoth efforts from 38 Engineer Regiment, the unit that supported 19 Light Brigade over its six month tour. By October, it was estimated that the brigade's sappers had erected 67.2 kilometres of Hesco bastion, or as one officer put it 'enough to surround Wembley football pitch 192 times'. This could have been viewed as a significant engineering achievement, or as a metaphor for the separation between British soldiers and villagers whose hearts and minds they were trying to win. Within the bases, a further eighty-three Hesco Accommodation Bunkers (HABs) were built, providing soldiers with blast proof sleeping quarters. HABs proved mostly unnecessary as Taliban mortar fire dwindled and was seldom effective. The bunkers, while unquestionably robust, also proved airless, oven-like caves in the heat of summer and were never popular with the soldiers.

The constraints on movements inevitably affected reconstruction efforts. According to DfID, over 2009, £190 million, had been invested in Helmand through the Provincial Reconstruction Team (£50 million from the UK, and £70 million from the US, the two majority donors). This grossly misrepresented the sum of funds actually disbursed, or wisely spent. A sample of projects undertaken suggested a far more modest outlay. $257,000 was disbursed in 443 micro loans – commonly the most effective disbursement of aid. Maintenance work on the Shamalan canal attracted $1.3 million in funds. Four schools were built, and eight refurbished by the British, in three years. It was claimed that there were now eighty-one schools open in Helmand, attended by 45,037 boys and 14,214 girls. In Sangin, new government offices, a school and a clinic were opened (although the latter would remain unused and without equipment when the brigade returned to the UK).

The most significant projects were undertaken in the relatively benign provincial capital. Around $10 million was disbursed in eighty projects. A headquarters for the counter-narcotics police was added to a police compound built earlier in the year. A new prison capable of holding 700 inmates was built – this proved to be a good long-term investments as ISAF ramped up detention operations in the last years of the war. The hospital received two ambulances (which was a start given that Lashkar Gah had precisely no ambulances). Four vital signs monitors, two portable ventilators, an operating table, and ten computers were also donated to the Italian-run hospital. RTA (Radio Television Afghanistan) gained a fancy new television and radio station, though very few Helmandis actually owned televisions.

Whatever DfID's dogmatic misgivings about military involvement in reconstruction and development it was thanks to a small eight man team of Royal Engineers (522

Specialist Team Royal Engineers) that projects like these were driven forward with some success, despite huge frustrations, and in some cases at all. As Christina Lamb critically reported in the previous year DfID and FCO personnel at the PRT rarely ventured outside the compound walls.[886] 'Those who occasionally brave the five-minute drive to the governor's office,' she observed, 'do so in armed convoys, surrounded by bodyguards and travelling at high speed. The cracks on the vehicles' windows from rocks thrown almost every time they go out are a measure of the locals' appreciation'. Perhaps an indication that life was becoming normal, if not enjoyable, for the citizens of Lashkar Gah was the restoration of Tortank Stadium. Fallen into disuse it had become no more than a dustbowl surrounded by graffiti-defaced high walls. By 2009, almost thirty clubs had established themselves in the refurbished facilities offering as diverse sports as basketball, tennis and cycling. Bodybuilding and martial arts – two traditional Afghan sports – unsurprisingly proved to be the most popular activities. The Taliban had banned organized football. Now Lashkar Gah boasted two football leagues. By the following year an Afghan pop star would be crooning to an excited crowd at this stadium.

The biggest spender in Helmand, since 2006, was in fact USAID. The gravel airstrip at Bost airport was asphalted and the new airport was opened by the American ambassador, Karl Eikenberry (at a cost of $45 million or as much as DfID's entire budget for Helmand for three years).[887] The southern perimeter of this airport, which the Russians had mined heavily, remained hazardous, but at least Helmand could now boast a proper, functioning civil airport. In a second phase of development an agricultural business park was built alongside the airport. This proved a white elephant. Without a viable means of exporting licit agricultural products, it was judged, Helmand's farmers would never be weaned off the opium poppy. These good intentions could sometimes be undermined by unexpected factors. Scores of police checkpoints had been built by ISAF to improve security on Helmand's roads. An unfortunate consequence of this was an uncontrolled proliferation of police bribery. A study suggested that it was now costing the average farmer several hundred dollars in bribes to get his products to market. Many did not bother, falling back on the opium poppy and the Taliban for protection (who taxed much less than government officials). Four years later, the agricultural business park, like the Kajaki Dam project, remained a mirage of dashed hopes. A $3 million cold storage facility in Gereshk went the same way – unused and abandoned.

These reconstruction projects demonstrated greater British engagement in the so-called 'comprehensive approach', however flawed, but the British contribution remained small

and the reality at the sharp end, outside the town limits of Lashkar Gah, could not be disguised. On election day in Sangin more money was expended on ammunition than was spent in the entire year's reconstruction budget for that district.[888] The dollars were still following the bullets.

Special force operations against Taliban leaders continued to be mounted, but seemingly struggled to make a decisive difference to the hydra-headed insurgency. These were rarely advertised although on some occasions ISAF deliberately reported the news to highlight a particular success. On 1 June Mullah Mansur was caught and killed in such an operation in Nahr-e Saraj district. Mullah Mansur had been a particularly active Taliban commander. Before he was killed Mansur was believed to have been responsible for killing two ISAF soldiers, as well as killing and wounding over a dozen policemen and fifty civilians. On the opening day of Operation Panchai Palang both British and American special forces were reportedly deployed, but it seems, judging from the resistance experienced by the Light Dragoons, these operations were not significant.[889] For the remainder of the five week operation, there is no evidence in any published accounts of direct support to Brigadier Radford from the British special force contingent. The brigade, it appears, was on its own. If this is the case, it raises questions. In the Falklands Conflict, 22 SAS had fought with and for the task force. Thirty years on, this was not obviously so.

The operational gallantry awards, as in previous tours, told their own story. Six Conspicuous Gallantry Crosses, seventeen Military Crosses, and four Queen's Gallantry Medals were awarded. Major Jo Butterfill, a fusilier, won his Military Cross leading his company south of Sangin, where his men found sixty-three IEDs and suffered twelve IED strikes. Lieutenant William Hignett, a Rifles platoon commander, led his men in the most evil place in Helmand, Wishtan, finding forty-four IEDs and barely suffering any casualties. Corporal Christopher Reynolds, a sniper, demonstrated a special brand of Celtic bellicosity. Locked in a gunfight, he ran out of ammunition for his sniper rifle, picked up an assault rifle and continued engaging the enemy with this weapon, fully exposed to the return fire. When this weapon ran out of ammunition he continued the fight by commandeering a machine gun. Gunner Steven Gadbsy was awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal for carrying two casualties over an exposed bridge, under enemy fire, rather than using a longer covered route, in an effort to get the casualties evacuated as quickly as possible. Sergeant Matthew Turrall, an Irish Guardsman, risked his own life to save three Afghan children caught in a cross fire. He was awarded the Military Cross for this action and later said that he had been led by a 'fatherly urge' to protect the children.

Two guardsmen who refused to follow him in this mad dash received a good bollocking. In every rank band and in every regiment extraordinary acts of bravery were being recorded.

Four George Medals would be awarded. The first went to Rifleman Paul Jacobs, a Vallon operator who was caught in multiple IED blasts, seriously wounded and rendered almost blind. Despite these injuries he retained sufficient composure to drag himself to safety through an area strewn with these deadly devices. The second went to Staff Sergeant Kim Hughes, a bomb disposal operator. Hughes was called to deal with one of the most appalling incidents endured by 2 Rifles during their difficult tour. A section caught in an IED field set off a device killing one of the riflemen. Two stretcher bearers then set off a second device. Both men were killed instantly and four were seriously wounded, one of whom would subsequently die of his wounds. Hughes manually cleared the area at enormous risk to himself to allow the safe extraction of the casualties. His citation read:

'Dealing with any form of IED is dangerous; to deal with seven VOIEDs linked in a single circuit, in a mass casualty scenario, using manual neutralisation techniques once, never mind three times, is the single most outstanding act of explosive ordnance disposal ever recorded in Afghanistan.'

Two posthumous George Medals were awarded. One was awarded to Captain Daniel Shepherd, another bomb disposal operator who in one gruelling thirty-six hour period disposed of thirteen IEDs, using only manual means and fingertip searching. In a number of these clearances he found himself under enemy fire. The second went to Staff Sergeant Olaf Schmid. Before he was killed, Schmid personally dealt with sixty-four confirmed IEDs. Schmid led the clearance of Pharmacy Road in Wishtan on the day when thirty-one bombs were discovered. Later he manually defused a radio controlled device attached to an artillery shell that might have killed and injured a large number of civilians in the bazaar in Sangin. He lost his life in an alleyway attempting to defuse a daisy chain of three IEDs on the day before he was due to return home.

CHAPTER 11
ALL CHANGE
Operations HERRICK 11-12
October 2009 – October 2010

19 Light Brigade handed over to its successor brigade, 11 Light Brigade, on 10 October 2010. The new brigade commander, James Cowan, had been the last operational commanding officer of the Black Watch before it was amalgamated into the Royal Regiment of Scotland. He led the battalion in the 2004 US-led operation to retake Fallujah, Operation Phantom Fury, which proved a bitter experience for this proud regiment. As if to underline the difficulties 11 Light Brigade would face, three of his soldiers were killed in separate incidents before Cowan had even formally assumed command. One month after the brigade hand-over in Helmand there was also a change at the top of the British command structure with Major General Nick Carter taking command of Regional Command (South) from the outgoing Dutch Major General Mart de Kruif. Like several senior British officers, this was Carter's second tour of Afghanistan. He would be joined by a fellow Royal Green Jacket officer, Lieutenant General Nick Parker, who served as Deputy Commander ISAF. Parker's son – an officer in the Rifles – would become a double amputee from the war. This was family sacrifice common to a wartime generation but unheard of in modern Britain.

Cowan announced his arrival with the necessary soapy statement:

'Only the people of Afghanistan can provide the lasting solution…we will do everything we can to help achieve this goal. To this end, we will consolidate our close relationship with our friends in the US Marine Corps and our civilian counterparts in the Provincial Reconstruction Team in order to bring prosperity to the people of Helmand.'[890]

Behind this rhetoric, however, was a thoughtful mind with a good understanding of Afghanistan's history and the recent tensions that were fuelling the insurgency in Helmand. Every tribal community, Cowan appreciated, was subtly different. There was no

single monolithic insurgency but rather several overlapping local insurgencies fuelled by different grievances. In Nad-e Ali, land disputes and tribal squabbles predominated. In Sangin, the Ishaqzai felt down-trodden and marginalised by President Karzai. The British had to make sense of these differences to make progress in the war. Cowan still lacked sufficient troops to decisively turn the British-held areas of Helmand but he enjoyed other advantages. For the first time since the beginning of the war, Task Force Helmand was firmly placed within an efficient and purposeful chain of command: from McChrystal, through his deputy General Rodriguez, down to the British general, Nick Carter. The special force campaign, for so long independent if not counter-productive to the overall war, was being ramped up. Cowan was also aware that a British Army that espoused a 'manoeuvrist approach' had become fixed. He would urge the brigade to think in a manoeuvrist fashion but the reality for the average soldier marooned in a patrol base would continue to be attrition warfare.

The deployment of the fresh brigade was accompanied by the announcement of a new course from the Prime Minister, when Parliament returned from its summer recess. This was perhaps Gordon Brown's worst statement on the war and certainly the least credible. After a sombre reading of the names of the thirty-seven servicemen who had died over the summer, Brown described how the task force would embark on an ambitious training program of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). This accorded with General McChrystal's overall policy of 'Afghanization' and in effect it signalled the initiation of a British exit strategy. The announced plan was both ambitious and disingenuous. The British would establish a police academy at Lashkar Gah and train up to 1,000 policemen a month for three years. This announcement was not untypical of a government that had got into the habit portraying past events as future initiatives, despite being caught out by the media when it played this game. The police training facility already existed. Known as the IHPTC (Interim Helmand Police Training Centre) it had been opened in the spring and it had been built with American dollars. And nobody seriously believed that the academy could churn out 12,000 trained and competent police officers every calendar year for the next three years. This was a fantastic number and it suggested that the Prime Minister had been fed wrong numbers by an aide.

The real figures, once the training regime became established, were more modest. The first 138 police recruits were trained in January 2010 (the intention had been to train 150 recruits in each cycle).[891] By March it was hoped that three cycles might run simultaneously totalling 450 recruits and as many as 2,550 trainees per year. In fact, the

British and contract trainers more or less kept to this goal and the 1,000th police recruit passed out in July 2010. The 2000th recruit received his pass certificate in January 2011. These numbers were not bad but they were far from the unrealistic figures presented to Parliament by the beleaguered Prime Minister.

The proposed numbers for the ANA were even more fantastic: British forces would train 40,000 ANA in 2010 (the task force was currently mentoring less than 2,000 reliable ANA and even this small commitment stretched British resources). A further 900 Afghan officers would be trained every month in Helmand. By the end of 2010, it was claimed, the British task force would be partnering a 10,000 strong ANA division. Again, this was so exaggerated a proposal that the lack of challenge it received from the sun-tanned MPs was surprising; the tans possibly offering a clue as to where their minds were still basking. Gordon Brown's integrity was not in question: it appears that noughts were added to the numbers, which the Prime Minister duly and innocently announced.

In a sleight of hand that again no MP challenged, Brown also announced that the British regional battlegroup would redeploy to central Helmand. This referred to the unit based at Kandahar. This battlegroup, as we have seen, had conducted an independent and successful campaign for the last two years with a mobile approach to counter-insurgency, unlike the other British battlegroups that were fixed in the Green Zone. It was the battlegroup that suffered the least casualties and manifested the highest tempo of operations. Four units had served in this role (1 Royal Gurkha Rifles supported by a Royal Welsh company, 3 Para, 42 Commando and the Black Watch). Between them they had suffered just eight fatalities.[892] The remainder of the task force had passed the 200th fatality mark. Now the regional reserve would adopt a static role and suffer attrition like the other infantry battlegroups. The ISAF regional commander would lose his best asset but British troop numbers in Helmand would be bumped up, a useful political consideration for the next occasion when the Prime Minister had to answer questions on troop levels in Helmand Province.

It was clear from these announcements that the casualty rates over the summer had panicked a government staring at electoral meltdown in the spring. Faced with a fight for its survival, the Labour government would force the hand of the armed forces. Ironically, even as the army was promulgating a new counter-insurgency doctrine it was effectively being told to curtail fighting and start training Afghan soldiers and policemen as quickly as possible. The single most important priority was to avoid British casualties and to limit the electoral liability of the Afghan war before the general election. An offer to send an

additional 500 soldiers (from 2 Royal Welsh) came across as a pre-election bribe: they would only be sent if the Afghans contributed more forces, if ISAF European partners increased their troop contributions, and if they were 'properly equipped'. This announcement was also disingenuous. 2 Royal Welsh was held back from deploying with 11 Light Brigade not to meet any of the conditions outlined to Parliament but to coincide with the anticipated American announcement of further troop reinforcements. Only too late, it appears, the MOD appreciated that the forthcoming 'Obama surge' would leave Britain in the embarrassing position of not being able to reciprocate with its own 'mini-surge'. This was especially embarrassing because Britain had vociferously criticised European allies for a lack of commitment. The only solution was to hold back the Royal Welsh (the commanding officer was only informed as he was about to deploy with his battalion to Helmand), and subsequently to release the battalion, following the American announcement, which was only finally made in early December. The appearance was thus given that London was 'doing its bit' in synchronicity with Washington. The Royal Welsh battalion paid for this politicking spending the next two months kicking its heels and with families living with the uncertainty of not knowing when husbands would be deployed, or for how long.

The problem, put simply, was that Britain had run out of infantry. Throughout the 1990s, infantry 'overstretch' had been a festering sore in parliamentary debates. The voices that warned of serious consequences if the number of county battalions was cut were not heeded. A Conservative government made deep cuts in *Options for Change*, and the Labour government downsized the infantry further under the controversial *Future Army Structures* program. By late 2009 the crisis in infantry manpower had become so acute (even with the end of operations in Iraq), the army was forced to re-role the surviving, merged infantry battalions. Four battalions (the Highlanders, 1 Duke of Lancaster's Regiment, 1 Royal Anglian and 4 Rifles) were plucked out of their existing armoured and mechanised roles and converted into light infantry battalions. The arithmetic of war could no longer be pushed aside. To sustain the campaign in Helmand into 2011 the army needed a minimum of thirty light infantry battalions. It only had twenty-two. The addition of four battalions would provide additional manpower by which time, hopefully, a British withdrawal would solve the problem.

For Britain, as well as all the other ISAF partners, America's next step in the war in Afghanistan remained the key and the man holding that key – President Obama – was giving nothing away. From September to the beginning of November, numerous meetings were held in camera with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and civilian agencies at the White House.

In a mirror image of the Vietnam War, the various actors played their familiar roles: the Joint Chiefs arguing for escalation, and State arguing for a political solution. However, journalists trying to read the runes were disappointed. Following an earlier leaking of General MacChrystal's draft report, tight security was imposed on the meetings. Critics accused the president of dithering and European allies fretted in the wings. Perhaps anyone trying to read President Obama's mind would have done well to follow him on the night of 29 October to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. No president in recent memory had attended the repatriation of servicemen killed on operations. The Bush administration had been extremely sensitive over this issue and attempted to restrict images of coffins draped with the Stars and Stripes. It was close to midnight when the C-17 landed at Dover carrying the bodies of the latest eighteen fatalities in a month that had witnessed the largest number of American fatalities (fifty-five) since the beginning of the war. A stiff and sombre President Obama, his trousers and jacket flapping on the windswept tarmac, saluted each of the eighteen coffins as they were brought off the aircraft and carried to the waiting hearses. The expression on his face was more eloquent than the hundreds of pages of assessments his advisors had submitted. President Obama was not going to follow the tortured and tragic path of a Democrat predecessor, Lyndon Baines Johnson. The salute, with hindsight, was a valedictory wave to a war he was not prepared to pursue at any cost.

The main obstacle holding back an announcement of the President's new strategy for Afghanistan was the still awaited outcome of the Afghan presidential election. This messy election was finally resolved in the beginning of November when Dr Abdullah Abdullah, financially broke and without reasonable hope of beating Hamid Karzai, withdrew from the second-round run-off. The Afghan electoral commission promptly awarded the election to Karzai, confirming him in office for the next five years. The deep disappointment in the West over the flawed election could hardly be disguised. Karzai was always likely to have been the winner – the polls had consistently placed him as a clear favourite - but the manner in which he won, with over a million fraudulent votes, tarnished the result and made his government appear illegitimate, not only in Western eyes, but also among many Afghans. For the soldiers in Helmand, the cancellation of the second-round run-off, just one week before the due date, was an immense relief. Nobody had been looking forward to a re-run of the fiasco of the first round election.

This relief was quickly shattered by an incident that rocked public opinion in Britain. Shortly after midday on 3 November, a combined British-Afghan patrol operating near the Kharotei village of Shin Kalay, in Nad e Ali District, returned to Checkpoint Blue 25 to rest and debrief. As was customary, the soldiers stripped off their body armour and sat in a circle

with their ANP counterparts to discuss the patrol. Above them in a sangar, a policeman manned the checkpoint machine gun that normally faced outwards towards the insurgent threat. The policeman was a man named Gulbuddin, a resident of Musa Qaleh who had served in the ANP for about two years. Later it would be alleged that he had an argument with a superior, or that he may have been high on opiates. In a moment of madness, Gulbuddin picked up the machine gun, pointed it at the British soldiers below him and opened fire. Three Grenadier Guardsmen and two Royal Military Policemen were killed instantly. Among the dead were the Regimental Sergeant Major of the Grenadier Guards, a teenager, and a Territorial Army volunteer. Six other soldiers were grievously injured. He also managed to wound his ANP commander and another policeman. He made his escape on a foot, reportedly wounded in the leg by a glancing shot.

A manhunt was immediately organised but as one weary ANP officer pointed out, just one 100 metres past the checkpoint was ‘Taliban country’. Two Chinooks and an American Blackhawk were despatched to retrieve the dead and evacuate the wounded. Suspicions were raised that Gulbuddin was a Taliban infiltrator, and indeed the Taliban were quick to claim him as one of their own. It appeared more likely that the policeman acted alone and without premeditation. What surprised old hands in Afghanistan was that such an incident had not happened earlier. The ANP was less a police force and more a militia that casually switched alliances between local powerbrokers, whether Taliban, tribal leaders or government officials. Taliban infiltration was widespread - many policemen had relatives in the insurgency as well as smallholdings on which they grew the opium poppy to supplement their $150 monthly salary. Corruption was endemic – you joined to make money through bribery and extortion. Drug-taking was rife. As many as a third deserted their posts and few were literate. When Gordon Brown, just two months earlier, outlined British plans to train 1,000 policemen every month for the next three years, this reality was not made clear or debated. A belt of 7.62mm ammunition fired from a machine gun had blown away any illusions about the future ANP.

The last victim of this attack may have been a seven week old baby named Khloe Abrams, in Northampton. Among the wounded had been a Lance Corporal Liam Culverhouse. He lost an eye and was subsequently discharged from the army. The civilian Culverhouse failed to settle down and led a somewhat chaotic and on occasions violent life. Three years after he was attacked, he attacked his daughter Khloe, smashing her skull and many other bones. She died eighteen months later in a hospice.[893]

The murder of the soldiers coincided with a widely reported article by the former

Labour minister Dr Kim Howells calling for a withdrawal from Afghanistan. Howells had served for three years in the House of Commons Intelligence and Security Committee, and had once supported the war. His defection to the anti-war lobby seemed symbolic. Paddy Ashdown, the former Liberal Democrat leader and thwarted envoy to Afghanistan weighed in on the other side of the debate arguing that a precipitous withdrawal as a result of one incident would be disastrous. Within two years he too would switch sides and argue the counter-case. The Prime Minister mourned the deaths, and everybody's nerves were on edge again. The chatter in the media proved to be over-reaction. Incidents of this type remained rare for the time being (at least in the British task force, American forces were beginning to suffer an increasing number of fratricide killings).

Notwithstanding, the timing of the attack could not have been worse. A week earlier, a UN compound in Kabul had been attacked and several staff had been killed. In response, the head of the UN mission in Afghanistan, Kai Eide, announced that 600 staff would be leaving the country. At Fort Hood, Texas a Muslim-American army major due to be posted to Afghanistan ran rampage and murdered twelve fellow soldiers and a civilian. And in Britain, the body of Staff Sergeant Olaf Schmid, the bomb disposal officer tragically killed at the end of his four month tour, was repatriated. With Remembrance Sunday less than a week away, the Prime Minister felt obliged to make a speech on Afghanistan. His tone was defiant: 'We must not, cannot, and will not walk away,' but there was little new in what he said and for the first time since the war began polls showed that an overwhelming number of Britons wanted the troops to come home.

As 11 Light Brigade units began to fan out across the British-held areas of Helmand, the soldiers knew that this tour would represent the beginning of the British contraction. Southern Helmand, where a British contingent had only truly held the town of Darvishan and its environs had been handed over to the US Marine Corps. Now Zad, where the British misadventure had begun was also being handed over to American forces. With the arrival of a further US marine brigade the remainder of northern Helmand would follow, reducing the British area of responsibility to central Helmand. The brigade also knew that it would embark on one last major British operation – Operation Moshtarak ('Together' in Dari) – to clear the Chah-e Anjir Triangle (CAT), between Nad-e Ali and Babaji Districts. This would coincide with an American operation to clear Marjah District to the south, which itself would be part of the wider Operation Hamkari taking place across south-west Afghanistan, effectively ISAF's last roll of the dice against the Pashtun insurgency.[894] Operation Moshtarak had been discussed since the summer. It was an open secret in

Helmand that the Americans and British were about to clear the last two ungoverned areas of central Helmand. The combination of the flawed Afghan election and President Obama's long consultation over the conduct of the war would effectively delay the start of the operation until the beginning of 2010. Finally clearing central Helmand, creating protected communities, and opening the roads would be the themes dominating the brigade's deployment.

The Household Cavalry Regiment (HCR), a unit with almost uninterrupted service in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001, was deployed to the northern battlegroup based at Musa Qaleh. Lieutenant Colonel Fullerton, who took a measured approach to this last British deployment in the town, described the disposition of his battlegroup thus:

'We find ourselves spread out across the Task Force Helmand area, with the Battle Group Headquarters, a troop from A Squadron and C Squadron in Musa Qaleh, A and B Squadron in Babaji, although this does change according to Brigade Reconnaissance Force taskings, and HQ Squadron split between Camp Bastion, FOB [Forward Operating Base] Edinburgh, just west of Musa Qaleh, and Musa Qaleh district centre. I have also formed E Squadron, consisting of both Household Cavalrymen and attached arms, who work as the Influence Group in Musa Qaleh; a most vital role in winning the support and consent of the local population.'[895]

This last British contingent in Musa Qaleh was ironically the most generously manned. The Fusiliers and Gurkhas before them had struggled to expand the security bubble around the town for want of sufficient troops. The HCR battlegroup was supported by A Company, 2 Royal Welsh (mounted in Warriors), A Company, 1 Royal Anglian (who had received just five weeks' notice of their deployment), B Company, 2 Yorkshire Regiment (the Green Howards), L (Néry) Battery from 1 Royal Horse Artillery, and supporting engineers, mechanics and signallers. The battlegroup would consolidate rather than expand the security bubble, drawing public criticism from the incoming US marine commander who would interpret this as an indication of a British lack of fight. For Fullerton this was a misreading of the situation in Musa Qaleh. The British had effectively secured the town and its immediate perimeter. Taking the fight to the Alizai tribesmen in petty gun battles in the Green Zone was benefiting nobody, least of all the civilian population the cavalrymen were supposed to be protecting (the battlegroup was proud to report that no civilians were killed during its six month tenure of Musa Qaleh). It was also unfair criticism in other respects: the battlegroup suffered a total of ninety-six casualties, over 200 IEDs were encountered and Fullerton's men were engaged in over 200 gun

fights. Fifteen Mastiffs suffered IED strikes but the crews survived (including an IED that detonated under the commanding officer's vehicle). The Warrior crews were less fortunate and two drivers were killed. Fears over the vulnerability of this vehicle meant that by the end of the tour it was being driven in reverse over dangerous ground (as any initiation would not catch the driver). The statistics speak for themselves: the Household Cavalry Regiment did not sidle out of Musa Qaleh.

In central Helmand, the Grenadier Guards, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Roly Walker, took over from the Welsh Guards. Walker, like Fullerton, would also survive an IED strike, travelling in a Ridgback, which implies that at least two British commanding officers owed their legs if not their lives to sound American engineering (unlike Lieutenant Colonel Thorneloe, who was killed in the inadequate Viking, a vehicle, incidentally, which has been retained post-Helmand, regardless that it is vulnerable). The outgoing Lieutenant Colonel Antelme who had assumed command following Thorneloe's death ensured a smooth hand-over by organising a dinner with Habibullah, the district governor. The Afghan was no doubt was impressed by the suaveness of his hosts. The geographical centre of the Grenadier Guards' area of responsibility – FOB Shawqat – was held by Nijmegen Company. The old PB Argyll, a school adjoining FOB Shawqat, reverted to its former use, and Governor Mangal was invited to cut the ribbon in a school re-opening ceremony. Queen's Company was deployed to Lashkar Gah, and No 2 Company was despatched to PB Wahid on the edge of the Green Zone. The Estonian armoured infantry company supporting the Grenadier Guards was deployed to PB Pimon, another base established on the edge of the Green Zone, overlooking the Nahr-e Bugra canal. Support Company from 2 Yorks (the Green Howards) provided the OMLTs training ANA and ANP personnel. E Battery, 1 Royal Horse Artillery was also based at PB Pimon, along with elements from the Combat Service and Support Company.

The last company in the battlegroup – Inkerman Company – was deployed to the Chah-e Anjir Triangle, taking over PB Shahzad. This was the large patrol base located within the buildings of the former Helmand Construction Company, immediately west of Chah-e Anjir. Inkerman Company was dispersed between Shahzad and several satellite bases: Five Tanks (named after prominent water tanks in the vicinity of the base), School House CP, Compound 23, Crossing Point 11, and Yellow 12.

The Grenadier Guards' tour had begun with the setback of the death of WO1 (RSM) Darren Chant (in the Grenadiers, the RSM is known as 'the Sergeant Major'). Chant was the highest ranking non-commissioned officer killed in Helmand. With the Commanding

Officer, he represented the spiritual head of a battalion. The psychological effect of his death was profound, not least because Chant had been an inspirational leader who had once saved the life of guardsman, carrying him on his back to safety. He left behind two families. His second wife, carrying an unborn child, was a Muslim.

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This would prove to be the only major setback of the tour. For the remainder of their deployment the Grenadier Guards would pursue a patient and cunning campaign, luring the insurgents into traps and commonly out-witting them. In this respect, the battalion demonstrated how a counter-insurgency campaign might be 'won' – at least tactically – from a matrix of fixed bases, by using these as secure locations from which to deploy and ambush insurgent gangs. Tribal dynamics and the presence of an effective and pro-British governor greatly aided the guardsmen, but the manner in which Lieutenant Colonel Roly Walker went about the business of securing Nad-e Ali nonetheless deserved recognition. At the heart of the scheme was a policy 'to develop a series of check points and patrol bases away from the populated areas to allow the locals to live in a normal enviroment [sic]. It also means that if fighting does take place, then at least it will be directed at the ISAF bases, therefore not endangering the lives of the locals'.[896] This was pursued in an incremental manner, gradually rather than forcefully squeezing the trouble makers away from the villages. In his words, 'The most important [task] was protecting the people and improving their freedom to move, as much to contrast how the situation used to be, with what it was now, and what it could be in the future; as it was to restore governance, stimulate trade and commerce, and resurrect the social fabric of damaged communities.'[897] Although Walker could not have known this at the time, his battalion laid the foundation for the pacification of Nad-e Ali. The British would win this war of attrition and grind out a sort of victory, but it would take a further two years of sacrifice.

The second and no less important part of the strategy was the work of the Military Stabilisation Support Team (MSST). This handful of soldiers was responsible for re-invigorating economic activity in Nad-e Ali by promoting reconstruction within the 'protected communities'. Existing shops in the bazaar were repaired and a project to build fifty-eight shops and a covered market was started. Drainage ditches were dug and the rutted tracks improved. Governor Habibullah was rewarded with new offices. The dilapidated health clinic in Nad-e Ali was refurbished and a new mosque was built. A football pitch was added to the school that had once served as PB Argyll. All this work was undertaken using Cash for Works programs providing local employment. A District

Community Council (DCC) was established through which village leaders, *wakils*, could express their needs for reconstruction. This was the 'ink spot zone of security' spreading as counter-insurgency theorists suggested it should.

Or at least this is how the British sought to portray it. The truth was more complex. Cash for Works programs were providing one source of income for family groups whose survival strategy always depended on diversifying income streams. The opium poppy remained the most important of these sources of income. Filling in pot holes for the British could not compete with this illicit crop. The same labourer might the next day pick up a weapon and shoot at the British, making money from the insurgents. Thriving bazaars became a cliché of British success but nobody could make the comparison between the busyness of bazaars before the arrival of the British and their current levels of activity. There was sufficient evidence to suggest that the bazaars had been flourishing and that it had been the fighting provoked by the presence of British troops that had caused their closure. In this respect economic activity in Nad-e Ali may have been returning to its pre-war levels (including the trading of opium bags in stalls a stone's throw away from the base, which the British had no hope of stopping and basically ignored). The DCCs – the foundation upon which the British based their hopes for good governance – attracted former enemies, narco-traffickers, tribal leaders who were known to have links with the Taliban, and even Taliban commanders. Governor Habibullah himself had links with the Taliban, which he exploited to keep the peace on behalf of the task force. There was little the British could do about this as the villagers had voted for these representatives. Michael Martin points out that the British were well aware of the composition of the new DCCs, but in a sure sign that the task force was learning to play the Afghan game, preferred inclusivity to alienation.[898] This more enlightened approach was reflected in personalities like Lieutenant Colonel Chalmers, the commanding officer of 2 PWRR, who wrote a highly perceptive article in *Infantryman* magazine entitled 'Preparing for Battlegroup Operations in Helmand: Lots of physics, not enough psychology'.[899] He would subsequently return to Helmand as a brigade commander where he would be able to put his ideas into practice.

In keeping with this new philosophy the British began to deploy a wide array of psychological techniques to win over the villagers to the government side. Much of this work was undertaken by 15 Psychological Operations Group, a small band of dedicated servicemen and women, many reservists, who became extremely skilled at their trade and scored some genuine successes. Initiatives included 'Sound Commander' (essentially a

loudspeaker mounted in patrol bases), Radio-in-a-Box or RIAB, bill boards, notice boards and vehicle banners. The simple trick of flying Afghan flags and bunting had an effect. The launch of Radio Nad-e Ali in early January 2010 proved a big success, particularly with women who previously had had no voice. In a sure sign that the British were beginning to understand who mattered in Helmandi society, mullahs were invited to speak on radio shows. Another initiative was the '110 Tip Line' which offered villagers a chance to tip off the security forces anonymously. Very soon it was receiving some 600 calls every week, a measure of just how frustrated ordinary farmers were with the continuing insurgency. The British also promoted community reward schemes, youth activities and village projects. There were frustrations and a good deal of corruption, but through this patient incremental approach a suspicious population gradually warmed to the 'Angrez' and their ways. The key to all this work, as the Grenadier Guards realised, was honesty. 'We had to take care to acknowledge publicly our weaknesses and our cock-ups,' as one Grenadier officer put it, adding mischievously 'perhaps in a way our politicians can avoid'.[900]

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An example of Walker's approach was the early construction of a checkpoint on the Nahr-e Bugra canal overlooking a military bridge erected by 10 Field Squadron Royal Engineers. The opening of 'Freedom Bridge' (in Pashto, the Pul-e Dosti) was attended by Governor Habibullah, the ANP Second-in-Command, Major Aziz, and National Directorate of Security Commander Wali Mohammed. The new bridge not only served a military purpose (providing an alternative IED-free crossing point) but it also served villagers. Impatient locals, or locals unschooled in the etiquette of bridge-opening ceremonies, began using the new crossing point before its official opening.

No 2 Company based at PB Wahid began its tour with a spectacular success, partly, it seemed, the making of a reckless insurgent commander. This patrol base represented the only significant British presence at the northern end of the Chah-e Anjir Triangle and this may have emboldened the insurgents to attempt to assault the base. Led by a Major Richard Green, the guardsmen proved wilier than the insurgents. Pattern-setting is unwise in an insurgency war, and the Taliban were commonly the worst offenders. In expectation of an attack, Green pre-positioned snipers on the likely insurgent approach routes. The tactic paid off: one sniper team managed to shoot four insurgents and a further four insurgents were shot in a subsequent gun battle. The following day, when the guardsmen set off to patrol the local area, they were engaged again by the irate gang that foolishly mounted a rash attack on the base itself. As many as twenty insurgents were judged to

have been killed or injured in this ill-judged venture. The guardsmen defending the base described it as a ‘kamikaze attack’, reminiscent of the platoon house sieges of the summer of 2006. Despite this setback, the insurgents were not finished. Attacks continued for the next three days. On one occasion a Javelin missile operator managed to score a hit against a group of gunmen who had apparently gathered in a cluster to receive their orders. By the time the fighting petered out, No 2 Company reckoned that they had accounted for about sixty insurgents in the local area. The tally may have been overestimated but there was no doubt that the confidence of this particular gang had been severely dented.

A similar scenario played out at the southern edge of the Grenadier Guards area of responsibility where the reconnaissance platoon, led by a Captain James Young, was based near the village of Gorup-e Shesh Kalay, a Baluchi village and therefore hostile to the soldiers. Turning the table on the insurgents the platoon had covertly infiltrated itself into a number of compounds and set up a deliberate ambush. As dawn broke an insurgent gang walked into the ambush. Snipers shot four of the insurgents initiating a gun battle that lasted all day. By the time the Taliban retreated sixteen of their number had reportedly been killed or wounded.

Although Operation Moshtarak would not start until the New Year, subsidiary operations were undertaken to nibble away at the insurgent safe havens in northern Nad-e Ali. In mid-December, No 2 Company swapped with the Estonian company and assumed control of PB Pimon, the patrol base situated on a bend of the Nahr-e Bugra canal, overlooking Chah-e Mirzai. The tribal mix surrounding the patrol base was complex and almost uniformly antagonistic to the British presence. Unlike the other Grenadier companies, No 2 Company did not have to man any satellite patrol bases which meant that at any one time it could deploy as many as five multiples on the ground, a great advantage where manpower was so short (the company was also used as a local reserve, and one platoon was even pressed into supporting an American special force operation).

For the first two weeks the company probed a known insurgent stronghold south of the village of Zorobad, a small settlement of just under forty compounds populated by the minority Hajis tribe. On Christmas day the company held a midnight mass and suspended all patrolling. Surprisingly, there were no attacks, which allowed the Christmas celebrations to proceed without incident. The number of anonymous parcels received by the soldiers, as in previous Christmases, overwhelmed the guardsmen. This was the lull before the start of Operation Tor Shapa’h (‘Black Night’) which began on Boxing Day. The aim of the operation was to break the back of insurgent gangs that continually

harassed PB Pimon, particularly in the villages of Baluchan, Kakaran and Noorzo Kalay. Baluchan, as the name suggested, was populated by Baluchis who were heavily involved in the narcotics trade. Kakaran, a village of just over sixty compounds, was home to Kakars who remained suspicious and hostile towards the British. Noorzo Kalay was the largest village. The Noorzai should have been friendly towards Western troops as many of their kinsmen had joined the ANP, but local politics overturned this general rule.

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To block 'squirters' the plan was to surround the area from all sides and gradually close the ring on any trapped insurgents. To achieve this No 2 Company would advance from the south-east and retrace a path back to PB Pimon. This would involve a night march carrying four days' worth of equipment and rations – a load that exceeded seventy kilograms per man in many cases. Once all the sub-units were on their lines of departure, No 2 Company would clear north, an ANA *kandak* would clear east, and an American special force contingent, supported by a company from 1 Royal Welsh would launch a heliborne raid on Baluchan and Kakaran.

The first day, predictably, resulted in a mêlée of gun fights as the guardsmen bumped into groups of gun-toting locals. Then the opposition melted away when the scale of the operation became apparent. For the next three days not a single shot was fired. The guardsmen returned to PB Pimon, clearing the village of Zorobad along the way, satisfied that the operation had been 'a huge success'. No casualties were suffered and the insurgents had been forced to disperse.

Following such operations, Major Green found reasons for optimism:

'The effect on the ground was immediately noticeable. Markets in the villages of Baluchan and Kakeran were bustling and children played with kites (banned by the Taliban) in the fields. With the establishment of ANA, ANCOP (Afghan National Contingency Operating Police) and ISAF Checkpoints, the population was secure. The people of Greater Chah-e-Mirza were quick to come to ISAF, the ANCOP and the ANA with their problems and intelligence. The wells in the villages were repaired and trees along the road trimmed back (the Taliban forbade this as it gave them cover whilst planting IEDs), paid for by the Government of Afghanistan. 'Local National walk-ins' (farmers) provided ISAF with the locations of tens of IEDs, a large weapons cache and an IED storage facility. In return there are now weekly Security Shuras (a meeting of local elders) held in each village with locals telling the ANA, ANCOP and IASF [sic] what they

can do to provide security for them.'[901]

The broader picture was not so rose-tinted. Chah-e Mirzai would remain relatively quiet for the remainder of the tour, but the insurgents would switch their attention east of PB Pimon.

Following the conclusion of Operation Tor Shapa'h it was decided to split No 2 Company across the newly cleared area south of PB Pimon. 6 Platoon was despatched to a checkpoint named Yellow 9 near the village of Noorzo Kalay; 5 Platoon was sent to Blue 9 between Baluchan and Kakaran villages; and 4 Platoon was given the responsibility of keeping an eye on Zorabad. Thirty ANP mentored by the Coldstream Guards added an 'Afghan face' to the new security presence.

This laydown of patrol bases seemed to work. The battalion blog recorded:

'The success of 2 Coy's AO [Area of Responsibility] has been reflected by no overt interference by INS [insurgents] and measured by winning the locals by, with and through the Afghan National Security Forces. As a result 5 Platoon has given their full attention on improving the standard of living for locals through a plethora of community projects. Wells have been dug, ditches cleared, canals dredged, bridges built, roads repaired and a school is currently in construction.'

6 Platoon, by contrast, found that their presence near Noorzo Kalay 'a seemingly quiet canal side kalay, surrounded by green fields and dissected by romantic, dusty roads' attracted more insurgent attacks. This did not prevent the guardsmen from repairing two hydro-electric dams and starting the construction of a village school, gestures which gradually drove a wedge between the troublemakers and villagers seeking some accommodation with the district government.

The guardsmen undeniably made progress in pacifying localised areas but Chah-e Mirzai remained hazardous, particularly to troops engaged in IED clearance operations. In early February, Warrant Officer Second Class David Markland, a highly experienced Royal Engineer Search Advisor was killed clearing a junction near Yellow 11. The junction had been comprehensively sown with IEDs, and three were subsequently discovered in the vicinity of the initial explosion. The crater left by the IED was over two metres wide - Markland had stood no chance.

Markland's death was a reminder that however many precautions the British took, on occasions, the insurgents were always going to get the better of the fight. Private Robert Hayes was a nineteen year old serving with Essex Company 1 Royal Anglian. He had only

served in the army eleven months when he was attached to the Grenadier Guards in Nad-e Ali. Posted to PB Paraang, a small base located south of the village of Khowshal Kalay, he and his comrades found that virtually every patrol was being ambushed by locals hiding behind compound walls and using virtually undetectable ‘murder holes’ to fire on the soldiers. The Welsh Guards before them had lived with the same predicament. Employing ICOM scanners to monitor insurgent radio chat it was also apparent that the village of Khowshal Kalay was supplying a dicking screen that monitored the movements of the soldiers whenever they left their patrol base. On 3 January a patrol set out as usual across the open fields surrounding the base. At just after 10am the soldiers were ambushed and one was wounded. Certain that they had been caught inside an IED field (the insurgents typically initiated their ambushes when patrols were in an area sown with IEDs) the patrol requested fire support. A volley of Javelin and Hellfire missiles was loosed at the suspected firing points allowing the patrol to extract and evacuate the casualty. One particular compound was judged to have been the principal enemy firing point. This unoccupied compound had been searched before by the platoon so no chances were taken and a hole was blown in a side door, rather than using the obvious entrance that was probably mined. The suspected insurgent firing point was in a small tower in a corner of the compound. Private Hayes led the way, sweeping the ground with his Vallon for possible IEDs. When he reached the base of the tower he paused at a wooden stairway leading to the roof. Hayes then made the fateful decision to climb the stairway. As he reached the top he set off an IED that killed him and buried his section commander in rubble. The shaken soldiers later recalled the Taliban crowing at their success over the ICOM chatter.

Six days before Christmas, Corporal Simon Hornby serving with Blenheim Company 2 Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment was part of a large patrol tasked to clear an insurgent firing point in a compound near PB Shamal Storrie, just three kilometres south of Nad-e Ali where the British were claiming some success with their ‘ink spot strategy’. To cover the patrol, an observation post was first established in an adjoining compound. Shortly after 11pm, with the cover in place, the patrol set off towards the suspect compound. ‘Barmaing’ at night (that is, conducting the IED sweep procedure) was an extremely dangerous business. It was not just hazardous for the Vallon men but for everyone following on behind because it was much harder to stay within the cleared lanes. Cyalume sticks and white mine tape were used to mark the cleared lanes, but on more than one occasion a soldier would accidentally step outside the safe area with fatal consequences. On this occasion the patrol reached the compound without incident. It then began to clear

the compound. This took an hour. Special attention was paid to the entrance, an obvious location for IEDs, and to the perimeter walls. In the course of the search some components were found that suggested that the compound had been used to manufacture IEDs. Corporal Hornby then settled on the roof of the compound to observe the area. Called to an orders group he climbed back down the side wall of the compound and made his way around the cleared perimeter to re-enter the main doorway through which the patrol had initially entered the compound. As he crossed the doorway, through which every other member of the patrol had previously crossed, he set off an IED which resulted in multiple traumatic amputations. Two other soldiers were wounded and three others were subsequently discovered to have suffered from a mix of blast injuries. Corporal Hornby survived long enough to be evacuated by an American Pedro but later succumbed to his wounds. This was his second tour of Afghanistan, and he had served in Iraq where he had been awarded a commendation. He left behind a widow. In a black twist, this conscientious NCO was remembered by one of his favourite catch phrases: ‘No stone unturned’.

Luck, of course, could fall both ways. Lieutenant Paddy Rice was serving with Inkerman Company, Grenadiers in the Chah-e Anjir Triangle. Very early in the tour his patrol was ambushed and he was shot in the back. The bullet struck the rear plate on his Osprey body armour, raced up the back of his neck and exited through his helmet. The livid wound tract left by the bullet was an almost textbook illustration of the effects of a high velocity missile transiting through human flesh. No vital parts were struck and the stunned lieutenant was able to return on foot to the patrol base from where he telephoned his parents to relate his lucky escape. After a three week stay at the Camp Bastion hospital he was back on duty on the frontline. A Lance Corporal Luke Reeson serving with Somme Company, 1 Lancs had a similar lucky escape. A bullet struck the front of his body armour, ricocheted through his jaw and he reportedly spat the bullet out. Three weeks later he too was back on the front line. At PB 4 in Babaji, a suicide bomber managed to sneak in the front gate and toss a grenade at the sentry. To the amazement of both, the grenade bounced off the soldier’s helmet. Incensed, the soldier (appropriately a Welshman) rugby-tackled the bomber and effected a successful arrest.

At PB Shahzad, where Inkerman Company was based, a policy of patient wooing of the locals was also being pursued, with encouraging results. This was in the eyes of the guardsmen ‘a more mature community’ and ‘very much a blueprint of what we are trying to develop across our AO (Area of Responsibility)’. The tribally mixed village of Chah-e Anjir that co-existed alongside the patrol base had never truly supported the insurgency

and Cash for Works programs were started to maintain good relations with the neighbours.

Throughout Nad-e Ali the guardsmen tried to implement the new McChrystal policy of ‘courageous restraint’ while not allowing the insurgents to feel the pressure against them was being relaxed. It was ‘a phrase easier to say than actually execute’, as the battalion reported, but the statistics showed that the British were indeed scaling back their level of firepower within the district. It was with some pride, for example, that Inkerman Company at Chah-e Anjir, like the cavalrymen in Musa Qaleh, completed its six month tour without killing a single civilian. By the spring, a school staffed by twenty-two paid teachers catering for 650 pupils had been opened, and the local market which had laid idle for eighteen months re-opened. The guardsmen started patrolling the town in berets rather than helmets. These were tangible results of the ‘softly softly’ approach. In this new order, aerial bombing dwindled to zero and gunners found themselves idle and unemployed. As befitted a regiment of the Foot Guards, it became very much a foot soldier’s and sometimes personal war. The argument whether courageous restraint was in fact causing more ISAF casualties proved difficult to settle. By the mid-way point of the tour, the battlegroup had suffered eight fatalities. Three times this number of soldiers had been wounded, a toll that included amputees. By the end of the tour the battlegroup had suffered fifteen fatalities and sixty-nine wounded. Just under a 100 soldiers were sent back to Britain as a result on non-battle injuries illustrating how manpower was drained in the infantry battlegroups, even without enemy action. A claim would later be made that insurgent incidents in Nad-e Ali had declined by 70 per cent but this was a misleading statement based on a snapshot of incidents at a time when insurgent activity traditionally declined.[902]

The Grenadier Guards did succeed in creating ‘protected communities’ but equally, insurgent gangs in Nad-e Ali proved tenacious. The guardsmen and attached infantry companies were involved in over 1,300 gun fights and found more than 500 IEDs (sixty-two of which detonated, mostly harmlessly against the better protected American vehicles). The Royal Engineers attached to the battlegoup built twenty new police checkpoints in Nad-e Ali District, a punishing work schedule over six months. Insurgent casualty figures remained controversial. The guardsmen estimated that the number of insurgents killed was ‘north of 600’. If this were the case the battlegroup would have killed the insurgent gangs in Nad-e Ali several times over, a highly unlikely proposition. It was true that over-confident or careless gunmen were punished and a large number of casualties were inflicted – mostly, it should be added, villagers taking pot shots at the

soldiers - but the claimed number of enemy killed was almost certainly exaggerated. With some honesty, the Guardsmen conceded that thirty-six civilians were killed, but only eight were directly attributable to British fire. Regardless of the true figure of enemy dead, when 2 Duke of Lancaster's Regiment took over Nad-e Ali in the autumn it was undeniable the district was no longer an insurgent safe haven, a not insignificant achievement on the part of the Grenadiers.

These numbers perhaps clouded the real reason for the successes enjoyed by the battlegroup, which was based on talking, not fighting. Walker was clear that the only long term answer in Nad-e Ali lay in understanding the grievances and aspirations of the tribes. This could only be achieved by spending hundreds of hours in conversation with the governor, his officials and the village *maliks*. The work, as Walker put it, was with the people, even if on occasions his guardsmen had to fight to get to work. When the guardsmen could not reach the villagers, the simple device of 'radio-in-a-box' (cheap radios handed out by the soldiers), helped to get the message across. The soldiers finally knew they were reaping some reward for this patient approach when the villagers came to them, and not the other way round.

Walker and his fellow commanding officers were undoubtedly helped by the near-persistent surveillance that the British were now beginning to achieve through the use of UAVs and fixed base cameras. The unmanned drones could not be everywhere or see everything, but often their presence alone was sufficient to act as a deterrent. An insurgent gang laying an IED or preparing an ambush could never quite tell whether it was being watched. On many occasions the distant sound of an invisible UAV was enough to cause gunmen to hide their weapons under bushes and to wait for a more favourable occasion. 32 Regiment, Royal Artillery had originally fielded two Israeli Hermes 450 UAVs in 2007. It now had five. Over the course of 11 Light Brigade's tour the regiment clocked up 570 flights totalling 6,555 hours of surveillance footage.[903] The RAF's No 2 Group which flew the American Reaper UAV offered similarly impressive statistics. The first Reaper had grown into a half-squadron of aircraft. There was now a Reaper airborne over Afghanistan every hour and day of the year. Since the start of Reaper operations, 10,500 hours had been flown and operators had launched ninety-four weapons from its airframe (it was the only armed UAV in the British inventory). At the tactical level the American hand-held Desert Hawk III remained popular. Soldiers lost and broke the Desert Hawk mini-UAV far too many times but still managed to rack up 3,954 flights over the course of Operation Herrick 11, totalling 2,394 hours of footage.

The success of UAVs in Helmand came at a steep cost. Over five years, the British would crash, break or lose 450 UAVs.[904] By 2013, this included one Reaper and as many as eleven Hermes 450s. The overwhelming number of losses was accounted by the Desert Hawk (412). This mini-UAV cost in the order of £100,000. The total losses therefore suggested that British soldiers had managed to write off or damage close to £100 million worth of UAVs. These staggering losses came about for a combination of reasons. Soldiers have always been incurably casual with government property; indeed, an argument could be made that wars are essentially exercises in turning government property into scrap. Constrained training, and the constant churn and loss of experienced operators also played a part. What cannot be hidden is that this was a long-standing problem that was not being addressed effectively: in both Kosovo and Iraq, the army similarly lost an alarmingly large number of UAVs, and despite questions raised by the Defence Select Committee, no effective measures had been found to end this wasteful haemorrhage.

To the north-east of Nad-e Ali, a sister regiment, the Coldstream Guards took over from the Light Dragoons battlegroup that had fought to clear Babaji District during Operation Panchai Palang. Led by Lieutenant Colonel Toby Gray the battlegroup was dispersed between four main patrol bases (unimaginatively named PBs 1,2,3 and 4), as well as a number of satellite bases that appeared to have been named by someone with a surfeit of imagination (PBs Hansel and Gretel, for example). No 2 Company assumed a police mentoring role but the battlegroup gained a Mastiff Group crewed by cavalrymen from the King's Royal Hussars (KRH), as well as a company from 3 Yorks (Duke of Wellington's Regiment). It would prove too difficult to use the Mastiff Group effectively in Babaji because of the lack of trafficable routes. The majority of the battlegroup was concentrated at PB4 which inevitably became the focus of insurgent mortar and PRG attacks. Frustratingly for the British, PB4 happened to be the compound of a notable whose nephew was a well-known Taliban commander, Sur Gul. 19 Light Brigade had been ignorant of this fact when the compound was first occupied. As was customary, the uncle was paid not ungenerous rent, a proportion of which he passed to his insurgent nephew. This went on for three years. As Michael Martin points out, this unusual arrangement caused some confusion amongst locals who believed the British were in some cunning way, conspiring with the Taliban (the same was true, of course, in locations like Sangin and Musa Qaleh where the British were tenants in the properties of known villains, creating the impression that they were secretly in cahoots with these).[905]

Lieutenant Colonel Toby Gray saw similarities between Babaji and the experience of

counter-terrorism in Ulster:

‘Operations are constant and, in much the way that we did in Northern Ireland, the Battle Group has set out to dominate our ‘patch’ with constant and aggressive patrolling. Whilst it’s demanding, it ensures that the enemy is given little space to operate and, ultimately, makes life a lot safer for our troops and the people amongst whom we operate. The areas in which the companies work vary – some, especially in the north east of the AO [Area of Operations] are much more developed and are being targeted for work such as setting up schools and clinics, developing agriculture and improving employment opportunities. Other areas, such as in the west where Numbers One and Three Company are operating, are very much less so and the task there is to win the trust of the people and put the insurgent onto the back foot – needless to say, they are up to the job and are making great strides in an area that, until last June, had never seen ISAF troops and was firmly in Taliban control.’[906]

The stiffest challenge facing the Coldstream Guards was a total absence of governance in Babaji, a condition which in many ways suited the dominant Barakzai tribe. The insurgents deliberately exploited this vacuum, on occasions with mindless attacks against civilians (a suicide attack in a market towards the end of the tour killed thirty-seven locals including women and children and wounded a further sixty). What precipitated this attack remains obscure. The British, as we have seen, knew very little about this block of land which they had wrested from the Taliban in the previous summer, and the locals knew little about their new neighbours, other than what was painted by Taliban propaganda. Mistrust and suspicion ran deep. The job of trying to win over the confidence of the villagers was placed in the hands of people like Captain Martha Fairlie who commanded the MSST (Military Stabilisation Support Team). As she recalled:

‘During the first few weeks, the locals were very suspicious of us and took a lot of persuasion to discuss how we could help them.’[907]

In a district that lacked any state schooling, trying to persuade villagers that it was in their interests to educate their children proved an uphill struggle. Eventually a meeting was arranged at Spin Masjid with education officials from Gereshk and it was agreed to re-open a disused former school called Wazir Fatir Han School. A sum of $200,000 was found to pay a local contractor to construct twelve classrooms. In the meantime, tents were erected and the school soon had 150 regular pupils and three teachers with a demand for more places. It would have been easy to be cynical about British efforts to re-start the habit of education in Helmand, but the experience of officers like Captain Fairlie

suggested that there was a genuine desire to graft the future of village children to an education, however rudimentary.

Projects like this were one of numerous initiatives started by the Coldstream Guards which included mosque rebuilds and various agricultural projects. The largest such endeavour was the construction of Route Trident, the first road-building project undertaken by the British Army, so it was claimed, since the Dhofar War. When 19 Light Brigade fought its way down the central spine of Babaji it became apparent that this neglected district did not have the route-carrying capacity for heavy military traffic. This also affected the locals who were unable to carry their produce to markets in Gereshk or Lashkar Gah. The single available route had also become dangerous for British soldiers – nineteen casualties had been suffered since the end of Operation Panther's Claw by convoys transiting between the bases, forcing air resupply which in some cases had to be fought over with the insurgents (and which contributed to the myth that the British were in fact supplying the Taliban).

The proposed solution was to build a military road joining PB 1 in the east to PB 4 in the west, along the line of an existing track. The distance was a mere eight kilometres but in Helmand even a short stretch of track presented significant obstacles. Culverts would have to be strengthened and in some cases replaced (a total of seventeen eventually). Landowners would have to be compensated where the road diverted from the original track. The Taliban were hardly likely to allow this work to proceed uninterrupted which meant that the work gangs would have to be protected every step of the way (in one of those unending Afghan ironies, by the end of the war, the greatly enriched Taliban became road-builders themselves, but at the time, road-building was perceived as a nefarious Western activity that had to be stopped). At first, road building under fire seemed an amusing novelty to the soldiers but the joke soon wore thin.

The work was entrusted to Support Troop 23 Amphibious Engineer Squadron, commanded by a Lieutenant Helen Ladd. After a reconnaissance and trials the sappers began building the road in mid-December, starting in the village of Gholam Dastagir Kalay near PB 1. The road itself was constructed from a material called Neoweb, a honeycomb geotextile concertina, overlaid by soil and aggregate supplied by unreliable local contractors. Despite the difficulties, the building of Route Trident was completed by the end of the tour (at a painful pace of about 100 metres per day) and the work stimulated employment for seventy locals prepared to brave Taliban intimidation. A journey which before was reckoned to take about thirty-six hours was reduced to four hours. As

importantly for the British, Neoweb could not be readily dug up and this greatly reduced the threat of roadside bombs. Eventually, Route Trident would be extended to join up with a Route Morpheus to improve road links between Lashkar Gah and Gereshk. By 2012-13, black-topped roads had begun to be laid to replace these rudimentary routes.

For the average guardsman, life in Babaji was a mix of boredom, frustration with the ANP, and occasional danger. Sharp contrasts in fate seemed to colour their experience.

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Lieutenant Douglas Dalzell joined the Coldstream Guards in 2008, having just missed the last deployment of the battalion to Helmand, and was posted to No 3 Company. When the battalion returned to the province, only a matter of eighteen months later, he was transferred to No 1 Company and assumed command of 2 Platoon. Dalzell was both a popular and conscientious officer ‘devoted to his platoon’. When the guardsmen deployed to Babaji they were confident that everything had been done to prepare them for their tour. However well prepared, 2 Platoon seemed fated to experience bad luck. On 30 November the platoon sergeant John Amer was killed in an IED strike. This was a severe blow. More battle and non-battlefield casualties followed, depleting the platoon. This run of bad luck was briefly put aside on Christmas day when the surprised platoon found themselves hosting General McChrystal for lunch. This was typical of McChrystal who sought to spend as much time with allies, listening and learning from their experiences, as with American soldiers. For Dalzell and his guardsmen, hosting a celebrity commander like McChrystal was a dazzling experience. In the New Year, 2 Platoon were once again embroiled in operations leading to the biggest offensive of the tour, Operation Moshtarak. On 18 February, a bright, cold day, Dalzell celebrated his birthday - and like every other day, the young officer set off with his platoon on another patrol. The task on this day was to search a compound which was a suspected Taliban firing point. The platoon approached the compound taking care to sweep the track leading to the main entrance. When they reached the doorway the lead Vallon man carefully checked for IEDs. Receiving no warning tones on his metal detector he stepped inside. The next man to follow was Dalzell. As the platoon commander he could have stayed back and allowed a section commander to lead. Dalzell stepped on the pressure plate of the IED which the Vallon had missed and suffered a traumatic amputation. In the ensuing scramble to call a medevac helicopter a signaller moved to the corner of an adjoining compound to get a better signal. He set off a second IED and suffered a double amputation. The stricken signaller lived. Dalzell died of his wounds. Fortune in war has always obeyed a perverse logic.

The dilemma of dealing with vulnerable points, such as compound doorways, was one that would never be solved. In many cases the soldiers had no choice but to proceed down a path which they knew was probably seeded with IEDs. In other cases, despite every care, the soldiers simply got caught out. By the end of the tour, the battalion had lost five guardsmen, all killed by IEDs.

Lance Corporal Shaw had followed his father into the army and started his service as a boy soldier at the age of sixteen. He joined his local regiment - the Duke of Wellington's Regiment (3 Yorks) – and fell in love with the army life, the only life he had ever known. A skydiver in the summer and a skier in the winter, Shaw fitted the uniform. In the winter of 2009 he was posted with his company to Babaji to support the Coldstream Guards, and found himself deployed to CP Kings Hill in the north-east corner of the district. Kings Hill was the worst spot in Babaji. A well-organised Taliban gang routinely targeted patrols leaving the base using a mix of IED types, and ICOM chatter revealed the presence of foreign fighters in the area. These fighters were commonly far more ruthless and fanatical than the local insurgents. As the number of attacks rose the soldiers became increasingly constrained to the immediate perimeter of the patrol base. Straying any further courted casualties. On 1 February, Shaw set out in a small patrol to check the perimeter of the base. At no point in the patrol were the soldiers further than 300 metres from the base and overlooked by the sangar sentries. Soon they noticed children leaving the area which was usually an indication of an impending attack so the patrol stopped and went into a 'soak'. After about ten minutes farmers returned to the fields so the soldiers decided to continue with the patrol. The interpreter attached to the patrol, however, was worried. The ICOM scanner revealed that they were being followed and then it picked up that 'the big thing' was being brought up. Taliban codes were never sophisticated ('melon' was a favourite codeword for an IED), so the soldiers now knew that an attack was being prepared.

The patrol then withdrew through a gap in the wall which was a known vulnerable point. The Vallon man swept the gap and checked for ground sign but found nothing. Content that the area appeared safe the patrol began to filter though the gap in the wall. Lance Corporal Shaw was the second to last man in the patrol. As he passed though the gap he set off an IED and was killed instantly. Every other man had somehow missed the pressure plate. Almost immediately a volley of fire erupted from a known ambush point 200 metres away. The last man in the patrol was Corporal Liam Riley, a twenty-one year old from Sheffield. The private who had passed through the gap ahead of Shaw shouted at Riley to remain where he was but he either failed to hear the warning, or chose to take his chances. Firing back at the insurgents he ran through the gap and set off a second IED

which caused multiple traumatic amputations. Riley subsequently died of his wounds. The entire gun battle had taken place in full view of Kings Hill. Incidents like this illustrated just what a treacherous and nerve-wracking war the common soldier was fighting every day in Helmand.

However parlous the situation remained in locations like Kings Hill, by far the worst place in Helmand was Sangin, a town bleeding the task force with a thousand cuts. 3 Rifles assumed command of Sangin on 19 October, taking over from the sister regiment 2 Rifles. As if to underline the level of fighting in the area, Witchcraft 22, a Fire Support Team based at FOB Armadillo recorded that the day before the hand-over it had fired off sixty-four artillery shells, two Hellfire missiles, two 500 pound bombs and two GMLRS rockets. The police in Sangin should have been 244 strong. In fact, three years into the war, there were just thirty-nine ANP based at Sangin, holed up in a battered building in the area of the market.[908] As one British NCO tasked with mentoring this sorry lot observed, they never left their checkpoints and were totally useless.

The 3 Rifles commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Nick Kitson, was a relative of General Sir Frank Kitson, the hard-nosed British commander who ruthlessly snuffed out the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya in the 1950s. The two Kitsons could not have been further apart. Mass hangings, a policy which no doubt would have had an electric effect on Sangin, were no longer a weapon in the armoury of British commanders. Nor could the modern Kitson employ the sanction ordered by Lord Roberts in 1880 – that any Afghan found bearing arms within a five mile radius of his base should be promptly shot, a measure, incidentally, which had the salutary effect of reducing attacks against the British and Indian soldiers to zero. He would have to fight within the modern rules of engagement, and what a tough fight this would prove.

A Company was deployed to FOB Nolay; B Company drew the short straw and was posted to the District Centre and satellite bases; and C Company found itself in the relatively peaceful FOB Zeebrugge at Kajaki. As with every other infantry battalion struggling to make up numbers, 3 Rifles was reinforced by A Company 4 Rifles, deployed to FOB Inkerman, and B Company the Royal Scots Borderers (1 Scots), deployed to FOB Wishtan. Fire support was provided by Chestnut Troop 1 Royal Horse Artillery and engineer support by 42 Field Squadron, 28 Engineer Regiment. Various other attachments completed the organisation that like its predecessor was over 1,400 strong.

Kitson believed in the strategy of clear-hold-build. This Petraean doctrine was energetically promoted by what would be the last British Army unit to serve in Sangin.

Towards the end of the tour Kitson wrote:

'Now that we are genuinely their neighbours in a large number of places (there are 29 security force locations of various shapes and size in the BG area, of which we are present in 23), we can communicate with the locals on a continuous basis, understand their hopes and fears and tell them the truth about what we are trying to do.'[909]

This policy rested on the blind hope that the predominantly Ishaqzai and Alikozai tribesmen of Sangin wanted to communicate with the British. The experience since 2006 had been that the only communication the locals wanted to exchange with foreign soldiers was gunfire. 2 Rifles had suffered grievously in Sangin. 3 Rifles would experience an even more bloody tour as Kitson attempted to spread British influence by dispersing his battlegroup amongst the hostile population.

One of the gravest problems, which remained unresolved since Tootal's arrival in Sangin at the head of 3 Para, was precisely the lack of a functioning police force. Sangin town was reckoned to have a population of about 20,000 with the contiguous settlements to the north and south perhaps raising this to 75,000. The ANP in Sangin were a lazy, unreliable lot, and later there would be a mass defection of policemen to the Taliban. For Kitson, the lack of a credible symbol of authority was the heart of the problem:

'The locals are highly prone to the tallest of stories that the Taleban have to offer. This intimidation and misinformation is purely to cow the population into submission – and rejection of the modern world - for no other purpose than to retain the dominance of power hungry extremists and smugglers with no interest beyond their own status and material gain.'[910]

The same comment might have been made by a British soldier serving in Afghanistan in the 19th century.

Kitson was also an astute observer of the landscape around him in other respects:

'This is a traditional and remote rural area with few trappings of the modern world, even by Afghan standards. Yes, there are battered old cars (normally White Toyota Corolla Estates from the 80s containing at least 15 people), motorbikes and the occasional ancient tractor but even the ubiquitous mobile phone has no functioning network here. The people have not had the benefit of meaningful modern education. The limited healthcare is normally in the hands of profiteers offering little but quackery for a populous [sic] that knows no better. Government services do not stretch much beyond the odd electricity line,

knitted together and only occasionally carrying a current.'[911]

3 Rifles' last foray at solving the problem of Sangin proved controversial and costly in lives. The desperate conditions of ordinary riflemen can be illustrated by the sombre and terse record left by the company sergeant major of A Company at Nolay. With the officer commanding the company on his mid-tour leave it fell to the warrant officer to maintain the company blog:

'The company was deeply saddened to lose five members of its team. Lance Corporal Christopher Roney (2 Platoon) was killed in an Incident at PB ALMAS on 21st December 2009, Corporal Lee Brownson and Rifleman Luke Farmer (2 Platoon) in a contact IED on 15th Jan 2010 during a night patrol and LCpl Daniel Cooper (2 Platoon) in a contact IED on 24th Jan 2010 whilst leading a resupply patrol. We have also suffered a number of other casualties, Rifleman Deare in a contact IED strike at PB HANJAR on 15TH [sic] December, Rifleman Parkes and Neville in a contact IED strike at PB JAMIL on 16th December 2009, LCpl Williams, Rifleman Swinhoe, Wildman, Cowd, and Woodford were injured in an incident at PB ALMAS on 21st December 2009, and Lance Bombardier Philips who received a gunshot wound to the thigh only last week.'

This was a rate of attrition that no battlegroup could sustain for more than a few months. Experienced and over-tasked soldiers were being lost. In his short career, Brownson, mentioned in the sergeant major's dispatch, had served in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. The home towns of the fallen servicemen revealed how many communities were being touched by the war: Bishop Auckland, Sunderland, Pontefract and Hereford. And the cost at home was mounting in other ways - two more widows and four more children had been added to the roll call of the bereaved from A Company's recent losses.

The attrition meant that platoons were routinely reduced to half-strength and tiredness was killing. Corporal Brownson and Rifleman Farmer, mentioned by the company sergeant major, died on the 88th day of their tour, a tour marked by continuous patrolling and endless gun fights with the insurgents. On the day they died they had been patrolling south of the District Centre in Sangin, a jumbled area of compounds, small orchards and fields. Over the course of the day they had been engaged in a gun battle and had come under mortar fire. It was close to 9pm and the soldiers – each carrying on average 40-50 kilograms – were very tired. As they crossed a ditch Corporal Brownson set off an IED. He and Rifleman Farmer were killed instantly. A third rifleman suffered serious injuries.

The confusion of battle was also killing soldiers, as it has always done. Lance Corporal Roney, a former drayman from Sunderland, had been based at PB Almas south of Sangin for six weeks. Five days before Christmas the base came under a sustained attack at night. This was unusual and with hindsight the soldiers should perhaps have been more suspicious. The following day the sleepless soldiers returned to the routine of manning the sangars. In fact, the attack appears to have been a diversion used to conceal the placement of a large IED flush against the wall of the south sangar. Nobody had spotted the insurgent emplacing the IED. At just after 6pm the IED detonated causing the south sangar to collapse. One rifleman was thrown clear of the sangar and landed outside the base, amazingly unhurt. His companion, a gunner, crashed through collapsed floor and ended up buried under rubble. He too escaped with only minor injuries. When the smoke cleared, the soldiers assessed that the base had been hit by some sort of rocket or large mortar bomb – what else could have caused so much damage? Crucially, the collapse of the south sangar had changed the appearance of PB Almas, confusing base surveillance cameras and a UAV, and this would have tragic and unforeseen consequences. As the incident unfolded two Apache were tasked to attack PB Almas on the mistaken belief that this was the insurgent firing point. Lance Corporal Roney was killed in the attack and ten other riflemen sustained injuries. The entire multiple was wiped out in less than a minute.

Despite such setbacks Kitson put a brave face on the situation. More patrol bases were built and more casualties incurred. 3 Rifles would man the most number of bases in Sangin of any British unit, and suffer the highest number of casualties. The southern patrol base line was extended early in the tour in Operation Ghartse Ghadmahe 1, and a similar operation was subsequently conducted to attempt to improve security on Route 611 north of Sangin. A possible correlation between being fixed and dispersed and high casualty counts was not drawn. Instead, an aggressive narrative was offered. ‘The insurgents cannot keep it up for long,’ Kitson reported, ‘we hit them hard when they show themselves and most of the population in the new areas welcome us’.[912]

This latter point was more wishful thinking than fact. Kitson was right that Sangin was war weary but locals associated the war not with the Taliban, their kinsmen and relatives, but with the presence of the British who had provoked the fighting in the summer of 2006. Eighty per cent of the population of Sangin District, according to a British estimate, was directly or indirectly involved in the illicit opium trade. The British and Americans after them would always hold the hope that somehow Sangin – a town at the centre of Afghanistan’s narcotics trade - could be turned to the government side. This consistently

proved a forlorn hope. And nor were the insurgents tiring. In the weeks following the clearance of Route 611 from Sangin to FOB Inkerman – a distance of no more than five kilometres, Sergeant Major Patrick Hyde, the A Company warrant officer responsible for ensuring the resupply of the new bases, would personally experience fourteen IED strikes (and survive them all, again, thanks to the American vehicles).[913] This unstoppable warrant officer would eventually experience seventeen IED strikes over the course of multiple tours, and be awarded a fully deserved Military Cross. His laconic comment at setting some sort of record was, 'I don't like driving a desk. I want to be a soldier'.[914] On Christmas day alone, thirteen IEDs were cleared from the vicinity of FOB Wishtan.[915]

Some progress was made but tangible changes remained confined to the immediate environs of the District Centre. The useless governor was replaced by a man in whom the British had more faith, Mohammed Sharif. The newly refurbished pharmacy, which had remained unused, began to receive medicines and patients. The district centre school began to function. The repaired bazaar began to fill up with stall holders. Kitson noticed women walking unveiled in the bazaars and the Eid al Adha was celebrated openly for the first time in four years, it was claimed. 'Courageous restraint' was acting as a calming influence on the landscape. In the previous six months, nearly 2,500 artillery shells were fired off by the Sangin battlegroup. 3 Rifles reduced this number to just forty-one.[916] Route security did improve despite the constant threat of IEDs.

This at least was the view from the eyrie of the Fire Support Tower at Sangin District Centre, but this was not generally the experience of ordinary riflemen in the outlying patrol bases. They mostly saw little of this purported 'progress'. The British claimed that fifty schools were now functioning in Sangin District. On the few occasions when soldiers made school visits they almost invariably encountered hostility or fear. The 'teacher' turned out to be an untrained local charged with looking after a group of children in return for food and perhaps board. There was no syllabus. Girls were thrown out at the age of eleven having learned to count and repeat verses from the Koran. Boys left at the age of fourteen, a majority semi-illiterate. Just getting to these 'schools' (commonly just annexes to a mosque) entailed taking such great risks that it was just not worth it. Sweeping for IEDs started from the moment the first rifleman stepped one foot beyond the front gate of the patrol base, and only stopped when the last rifleman re-entered the patrol base.

Kitson drove his men in what amounted to a last British gamble in Sangin. 2 Rifles had averaged around ten patrols a day. Kitson pushed this up to fifty. The sister battalion had mounted around 800 patrols in its six month tour. Kitson raised this number to 1,000 *per*

month. Inevitably, the casualty clock started ticking and rang alarm tones by the time 3 Rifles handed over to 40 Commando.

The first to be killed was Serjeant Phillip Scott who had already completed two tours of Iraq. He was killed by an IED on 5 November, leaving behind a widow and two children. His brother was a platoon sergeant in A Company. Two more lives would be claimed that November. The expectation that December might prove a quiet month was dashed when two suicide bombers on a motorcycle killed Lance Corporal David Kirkness and Rifleman James Brown, an eighteen year old from Orpington. He had been with the company less than two weeks. Four more soldiers would be killed in Sangin over the Christmas period. IEDs continued to represent the biggest single threat to the riflemen who suffered a further nine fatalities in the first two months of the New Year. Six more riflemen were killed in the first week of March, all but two killed by small arms fire. Scoped weapons, which the British always feared might enter the insurgent arsenal, were making their appearance in Sangin. The last three soldiers died in the fourth week of March. A total of twenty-seven soldiers lost their lives in Sangin, including soldiers from other regiments attached to the 3 Rifles battlegroup. Well over one hundred were injured, a total that included several single and double amputees. Not everyone would have agreed that this human cost was being reflected by ‘progress’ in Sangin.

The other two infantry battalions in Helmand, 1 Royal Anglian and 2 Yorks (the Green Howards) had either been split up between the ‘ground holding battlegroups’ or were being used to mentor Afghan soldiers. In the case of the Royal Anglians, A (Norfolk) Company was attached to the Household Cavalry Regiment (HCR) in Musa Qaleh, C (Essex) Company joined the Grenadier Guards in Nad-e Ali, and D (Cambridgeshire) Company reinforced the Danish battlegroup at PB Khah Nikhar. This latter location had become encircled by a series of IED belts which meant that the British literally only commanded a 200 metre radius around the base. In the first clearance operation mounted by Cambridgeshire Company, twenty-eight IEDs were found within five minutes’ walking distance of Khar Nikah. This only left 1 Royal Welsh, the Cinderella that remained in Britain following a hasty change of plan at the end of the Parliamentary summer recess.

On 2 December President Obama made the long-awaited announcement on the future of America’s commitment to the war in Afghanistan. It sounded like ‘the latest treatment for a dying patient’, in journalist Michael Yon’s words.[917] Symbolically, the announcement was made in a speech to army cadets at West Point Military Academy. After ninety-three days of deliberation – dithering in the view of critics – and ten gruelling

meetings with an inner council of advisors, expectations were high. If the audience expected a dramatic announcement, they left disappointed. As anticipated, a surge of 30,000 troops would be authorised with the bulk of the troops arriving in Afghanistan by the middle of the following year. General McChrystal would be 10,000 troops short of the reinforcement he requested at the beginning of the year, but at least he could be satisfied that his overall strategy had been approved. The British also had reason to be satisfied: a further US marine brigade would be deployed to Helmand. In an unfortunate parallel, the American surge, together with the smaller increases promised by other NATO countries, meant that total ISAF troop numbers deployed in Afghanistan would now match Soviet troop levels at the height of the Afghan-Soviet war – a point not missed by critics of the war.

The question was, of course, would the surge work? In the 1980s, the US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) had been doubtful that increased Soviet troop levels would make any significant difference to the war in Afghanistan. The assessment, worth quoting in full, could equally well have applied to the strategy McChrystal was proposing:

'The resistance forces could continue the insurgency for the foreseeable future at its present level against Soviet forces. We believe the Soviets would have to double their strength in order to break the current deadlock. A 50,000 man increase in Soviet personnel would not significantly alter the current situation. However, if the 50,000 man increment were to be concentrated in one area, it could be temporarily pacified. But when they move on to another problem area, the insurgents would probably reassert control.'[918]

In intelligence assessments, it has always been more difficult to see the mote in one's own eye.

Questions over whether the American strategy would work were not foremost in all minds. What made the champagne corks pop in London (and in other European capitals) was not the announcement of an American surge, but the announcement of an American withdrawal. In a break from the Bush administration that studiously avoided committing America to withdrawal timetables, President Obama made the bold announcement that American troops would start withdrawing from Afghanistan in the summer of 2011 – or in time for the next American presidential race. The war, now routinely dubbed 'Obama's War' by the media, had a finite timetable. Afghanistan would not sink his chances of re-election. An American president had drawn European allies into an unpopular war, and now a second American president was abandoning the ship, or at least returning the ship to harbour. For most European leaders the question was no longer could the war be 'won',

a possibility that few countenanced, but would the war still sink their own electoral chances?

No European leader was more pressed by this question than the British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. Facing an election in five months, and trailing badly in the polls, the Labour government needed to exploit President Obama's announcement of a withdrawal by laying out the road map of a British withdrawal before the next general election. The mechanism for this political manoeuvring had already been carefully prepared by the announcement in October that Britain would host a conference on the future of Afghanistan in January of the following year. This would be the opportunity – the last opportunity – for the Labour government to rescue the war in the eyes of the electorate. The significance of this was not missed by the opposition. In early December, the leader of the opposition David Cameron pre-empted this conference by visiting Afghanistan and making the headline-grabbing announcement that under a Conservative government the overseas allowance for troops serving in Afghanistan would be doubled (a promise he kept). As astutely, Cameron undermined the anticipated Labour announcement of a British withdrawal timetable by declaring that withdrawal should not be arbitrary, but rather be linked to campaign success (a condition he would abandon once in power). It was a bullish but risky announcement. If, as the polls predicted, he assumed power in May, the war would become 'Cameron's War', and it would be a Conservative and not Labour government that would have to demonstrate success before withdrawal.

The announcement of the American withdrawal, however welcomed in private, was bound to cause public controversy. Republican opponents lambasted President Obama for failing to link withdrawal with success in the war. Democrats defended the announcement by stressing that withdrawal would be reviewed and conducted in stages. America would continue to commit to a stable 'Afpak' region, without offering an open-ended commitment to fighting the insurgency in Afghanistan. For the Taliban, who had already seized on President Obama's hesitation as a sign of weakness, the announcement of a withdrawal was cause for celebration. Old mujahidin remembered Gorbachev's announcement of the Soviet pull-out. It was now just a question of endurance. In a statement released to taunt the American administration, a Taliban spokesman welcomed the surge, making the not inaccurate observation that it would provide more opportunities to kill American soldiers, before they quit Afghanistan.

Taliban public optimism belied frictions that were affecting the organisation's capacity to mount a coherent campaign. In an interview, Air Chief Marshal Jock Stirrup, the Chief

of Defence Staff, gave a rare insight into the Taliban that normally remained within the files of classified documents.[919] Insurgent fighters were squabbling amongst themselves and manifesting signs of war weariness. Arrests in Pakistan had spooked senior Taliban, and the Pakistani Army's offensive in Waziristan had disrupted insurgent safe havens. Brutality had lost them the support of tribes and there was in-fighting within the leadership. 'My judgement,' the CDS concluded, 'is that this is a struggle in which either side can still succeed. But the Taliban can't win. They need us to fail… Our people know that they can succeed; that we'll only fail if we choose to fail. We owe it to them, and to those we've lost, not to make that choice.' The war, in other words, had to go on.

The early December announcement by President Obama of an American surge gave the green light for the deployment of 1 Royal Welsh. This light role battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Nick Lock, deployed to Helmand by the end of the same month.

The Welshmen were soon in action in the area known as 'the Babaji Pear' in the south-west corner of Babaji. The aim of their first mission - Operation Bambirik - was to clear a group of insurgents from this lawless area where they had settled after Operation Panchai Palang. Eventually, there would be three Bambiriks, each building on intelligence gathered in the previous operation. The Welsh Guards in the summer of 2009 had started their advance from roughly this same area but had bypassed the villages. With its pattern of canal systems and mix of cultivated and semi-desert land, 'the Pear' offered a secure sanctuary for the Taliban. The operation took place in late January and involved a dawn helicopter assault. Around 300 Royal Welsh were landed in boggy fields, meeting little initial resistance. Sapper Leo Sayer who landed with the Welshmen described the action:

'We all presumed it would be a quiet 5 days that we were planned to be out, but we couldn't have been more wrong! We flew out of Camp BASTION and landed in a field, we sat in it for quite some time, of which the only reason I could see was for us to get cold. Eventually we moved off and the first thing waiting for us was a waist deep stream; just what you want in your first 100 metres - fantastic! When the sun came up … we all knew what was about to happen … "prepare to move" was passed down the line, just as I managed to get to my feet with my 50kg bag and had picked up my LMG, "BANG, BANG, CRACK"… I heard someone shout "Happy New Year Boys", what a good way to start 2010!'[920]

Over the next two days the Royal Welsh continued to probe suspected insurgent compounds meeting sporadic machine gun and RPG fire. Eventually, Sapper Sayer recorded, 'we started to run short of ammunition' and the decision to withdraw was taken.

The helicopter extraction seemed to reinforce in the young engineer's mind the eternal prejudice of frontline troops towards headquarters staff:

'Before we started the op we were told "as soon as you need pulling out it will happen straight away", loyal words from Capt 'Seb' Bezdel, SIX hours later the helicopters decided to show up, and what an event that turned out to be. The landing site was deep mud so the helicopters had to hover, the down thrust was blasting people onto their backs into the muck; LCpl 'T-Rex' Walker almost gave up as I heard him cry out to the heli crew "just leave without me" as he lay flailing face down in the bog totally knackered. How noble!'

In the end there had been no large scale confrontations and perhaps the most useful lesson derived from the operation was the suspicion that the area north of 'the Pear', the Chah-e Anjir Triangle, would be ripe for the plucking in the forthcoming Operation Moshtarak. The insurgents seemed more interested in self-preservation rather than fighting, in one incident deliberately herding children between them and the Welshmen.

Before the start of Moshtarak there was one final political gesture. On 28 January, the London Conference was hosted at Lancaster House. This was Gordon Brown's last major engagement on the war in Afghanistan – by May he would be out of office. The predominant theme was reconciliation, promoted by Foreign Secretary David Miliband with more hope than realistic expectations of success. £86 million was pledged towards a reconciliation fund (of which the UK managed to escape with a paltry £3 million commitment). Despite Downing Street's attempt to portray the London Conference as a demonstration of the Prime Minister's statesmanship it only managed to fill the back end of the news pages. Not that far from where the delegates sat to pontificate on reconciliation in Afghanistan, the Chilcott Inquiry was beginning its inquisition into the Labour government's decision to go to war in Iraq. The cameras did not linger long at Lancaster House. More importantly, the London Conference was snubbed by the Americans. The White House did not wish to be associated with the dying days of a Labour government and it did not share pious British hopes over reconciliation anyway (a stance it would abandon by the following year).

Operation Moshtarak was a hugely important operation in the story of Britain's war in Helmand. It was not only the last major operation undertaken by Task Force Helmand, at the height of its strength, but it also represented the culmination of almost four years of painfully won lessons. If Moshtarak were bungled, the British might as well pack up and go home. It also illustrated the limits of British military power. An army officer at the end

of the 20th century would have imbibed the exaggerated notion that a brigade area of responsibility was a 300 kilometre square box. The figure was actually drawn from American doctrine, and was derived from the range of the ATACMs rocket which the Royal Artillery had hoped to procure following the first Gulf War. This was the battle space which it was judged, an 'agile, network-enabled, rapid effects' British Army brigade would dominate in the future, to use the ridiculous jargon. This delusional thinking gestated from the unreal world of 'the Revolution in Military Affairs'. Real war punctured this balloon and the deflation was spectacular. In Moshtarak the entire resources of a British Army brigade were concentrated on piece of land shaped like an upside down triangle whose sides measured no more than five kilometres. The main objectives of the operation were just two small villages – Showal and Naqelabad Kalay - and the enemy was a small number of insurgents armed with light weapons. There were believed to be perhaps 100-150 insurgents in the area, and possibly the same number in adjoining Babaji. In this respect, Operation Moshtarak was a hubristic finale to a decade of fantasy thinking that had permeated the army since the late 1990s.

The Chah-e Anjir Triangle, or 'CAT' for short, was the elbow joint that joined Nad-e Ali and Babaji Districts (it was also confusingly known as 'Area 31', which gave birth to Combined Force 31 for the operation). A British presence had been established at the bottom apex of the triangle, at Chah-e Anjir itself, and a second British base had been established at the entrance of the main wadi in the north, but the rest of the ground remained 'Taliban country'. Just north of Chah-e Anjir was the small village of Abdul Wahid Kalay, dominated by Noorzai and hostile to the British. This village would have to be secured to ensure further progress into the centre of the triangle. At the top of the triangle were the two villages which were the main objectives of the operation. Adjoining the Nahr-e Bugra canal was Showal (literally 'crane', named after an abandoned crane from which the Taliban used to fly their flag). This was a predominantly Kharotei village of less than 1,000 inhabitants. Further south was Naqelabad Kalay, another mainly Kharotei settlement. Both had previously supported *Hizb-e Islami* during the Soviet-Afghan War, and were therefore hostile to the *Haraka*t cronies who seized power after the war. Further to the east was a collection of compounds on the southern bank of the canal near a wadi called Naray Mandeh. This had a mixed population. In fact, there were over twelve tribal groups living in the area, including Tajiks and Hazaras. 'CAT' had few vehicle-capable tracks and the few that existed were extensively seeded with IEDs. Clearing the area would be a foot slog. Perhaps 14,000 tribesmen lived within this small triangle of land.

Operation Moshtarak was part of a wider three phase strategy. The first phase involved the reorganisation of forces around Kandahar city, a measure made necessary by the imminent withdrawal of Canadian forces from Afghanistan (the Dutch in Uruzgan had already left in the summer, the first ISAF contingent to quit the war). This reorganisation had already largely been completed. The second phase was the clearance of central Helmand. The last phase (Operation Hamkari), anticipated to take place in the spring would involve a major effort to restore governance in Kandahar. The clearance of central Helmand was preceded by six weeks of preparatory operations, one in the north in Chah-e Mirzai, described earlier, and one in the south on the boundary of Nad-e Ali and Marjah Districts. This latter operation conducted in the first week of February involved the Grenadier Guards supported by a company of Royal Welsh and Scots Guards in a heliborne and ground assault. In a thirty-six hour operation, a corridor of land was secured which US marines would later use as an axis of advance into Marjah itself. Further operations were conducted by an American task force securing an area known as Five-Ways Junction and crossing points over Canal 56, a subsidiary branch of the Nahr-e Bugra canal (where 3 Commando Brigade had fought the previous winter). In the Bolan desert west of Lashkar Gah, Danish tanks supported by reconnaissance vehicles from the Household Cavalry were used to block potential insurgent escape routes in this latter operation.

The most significant preparatory operation, as far as the British were concerned, was a series of special force raids conducted mainly in the village of Showal, the main objective in the operation. Over twenty insurgent commanders were reportedly killed, captured or forced to flee, attracting jingoistic headlines in the popular press who lauded the SAS (it is not actually clear whether these operations were in fact conducted by the British contingent, or by the American Green Berets – it is known that American company-sized special force operations were conducted in the area, in one case resulting in a fourteen hour gun battle with casualties on both sides).[921] The Taliban enclave was effectively decapitated before the fighting had even begun and the lack of resistance which the follow-on ground forces subsequently encountered was directly attributable to the raids. What happened at Showal demonstrated how the integration of special force and conventional operations could have a decisive effect, but it had taken four years to get to this level of cooperation – indeed Operation Moshtarak was the first and only major British operation where this cooperation is evident.

The main phase of Operation Moshtarak began on Saturday 13 February. Over 15,000

troops took part in the operation, although this figure was highly misleading as the proportion of frontline troops was actually much smaller. The watchword of the operation was articulated by Major General Messenger: ‘Where we go, we will stay. Where we stay, we will build’. On the British side, the major units involved included the Grenadier Guards, the Coldstream Guards, 1 Royal Welsh and the Household Cavalry. On the American side, the assault forces included 1/3 Marines, 1/6 Marines, 3/6 Marines, 4/23 Marines (a Stryker battalion), and a LARR (Light Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment). Extensive combat engineer resources were made available as well as lavish ground attack and helicopter support.

The operation began with a massive heliborne insertion of around 1,200 soldiers. This was the most complex and demanding air control operation mounted by the RAF in Helmand and it required every available transport helicopter in south-west Afghanistan. At any one stage over sixty aircraft were operating in relatively confined airspace, at night, and against a demanding schedule. The fact that this part of the operation was completed on time and without incident was a great testament to the planning staffs, pilots and ground crew of the Joint Helicopter Force. Flight Lieutenant ‘Haz’ Hasley, one of the Chinook pilots, described the excitement of that night:

‘We struck out at low level under the moonless night towards our objective which was the insurgent held town of Showal. En route to target the ambient light levels were so poor that even our NVGs [Night Vision Goggles] struggled to provide much more than a dark green nothingness. However, with only a few short miles to go the goggles erupted in a bright and clear picture provided by infrared flares invisible to the naked eye, dropped from a circling C-130 Hercules from overhead. On short finals to the target, the formation of Chinooks tightened spacing and pitched noses up hard to decelerate quickly. The back wheels dug into the soft ground of the muddy field and we disgorged our complement of Royal Welsh and ANA troops. Seconds later we were wheels up and racing back to Bastion airfield to pick up our next chalk of soldiers.’[922]

Over the course of the night, Hasley and the other three British Chinooks in his flight ferried 650 British and Afghan soldiers to their lines of departure in a relay that lasted two hours.

The airborne assault, spearheaded by A Company 1 Royal Welsh and 1/3/201 Kandak of the ANA met no opposition. The 240 strong B Company landed in Shaheed, two hours before first light, securing three objectives with the assistance of an Afghan ‘Tiger Team’. Unusually, the ANA kandak was drawn from Kabul and included a eighty-six strong

French contingent, the only occasion in the war when Gallic soldiers fought alongside British soldiers. Eventually, the Royal Welsh secured eight small settlements at the northern end of 'CAT', all but one without a fight. There were no casualties, as far as anyone could tell on either side, and no civilians were injured.

Foreign fighters seemed to have fled and the local insurgents chose to keep their heads down and observe the unfolding operation. A similar scene was being played out in Marjah where US marine companies were also inserted by helicopter. In a simultaneous ground advance, the Coldstream Guards supported by 6/2/215 Kandak advanced into southern Babaji to act as a block along the line of the Shamalan canal. To the south-west, the Grenadier Guards, with an Estonian mechanised company and 1/3/215 Kandak began to advance north from Chah-e Anjir.

Progress for the Grenadiers was slow and deliberate. On 5 February the guardsmen had already cleared a vital node known as Shirin Jan junction near Chah-e Anjir. This operation had not been without its difficulties, as one guardsman recalled with a Milliganesque touch:

'We set off in the pitch blackness across some of the worse terrain we'd experienced in Afghanistan with Gdsm Heaton checking for IED's the whole way. It will be remembered by all as the insertion from hell. Gdsm Challinor summed it up when he was heard saying "I can't go on anymore, just leave me here I'll be alright!" LSgt Mann decided that he needed a wash and fell in a river where he had to be rescued by WO1 Stevens.'[923]

The object of these night infiltrations, which the guardsmen used to great effect, was to get behind the Taliban screen. The far harder task was clearing the kilometre stretch of a track known as Washir Road to a point called Yellow 11. An American engineer team, Task Force Thor, struck an IED and had to retire. A second team found eight IEDs and a further four were turned in by local villagers. The insurgents naturally tried to impede this route clearance and eventually it took three days of repeated clearances before the Washir Road could be declared safe.

The securing of this area was the springboard for an investment of the village of Abdul Wahid Kalay, the main settlement in the southern half of the 'CAT', into which all the major tracks ran. Whoever held Abdul Wahid Kalay dominated all movement south and north. The operation to secure Abdul Wahid Kalay was supported by the reconnaissance platoon of 1 Royal Anglian, mounted in Scimitars; the Grenadier's own reconnaissance platoon; and a platoon of Helmandi Scouts. As expected, the initial advance was met by

sporadic fire from the outskirts of the village. This barely lasted a couple of hours as the Scimitars swiftly out-gunned the insurgents with accurate cannon fire. By 12 February the village had been secured, ahead of the airborne phase of Operation Moshtarak. The biggest threat to the soldiers then was not the insurgents, who had melted away, but the belts of IEDs that they had left behind. On some routes the mining had been so intensive locals had not used the tracks for the previous eight months. To avoid these traps the soldiers opened cross-country routes which lengthened supply routes and inevitably led to breakdowns due to the broken nature of the ground. One detachment tasked with running supplies to Abdul Wahid Kalay over a stretch of a few hundred metres of muddy fields started the operation with three Jackals. By the third day of operations, two of these vehicles had been written off simply from negotiating the numerous ditches and banks that separated the frontline from the echelon areas.

In common with their experience in northern Nad-e Ali, the guardsmen found a local populace ripe for conversion to the government side, if handled sensitively:

‘The careful way that the soldiers of the Company had fought in the preceding five months appears to have paid off in that the local people in both new areas commented on the care that had been taken and the absence of harm done to civilians by the Company until then. We seek to build on this glimmer of good will to take forward the mission.’

Handling the locals with sensitivity vied with handling the forces of nature. February was usually the wettest month in Helmand, a factor which the military planners appeared to have accepted with resignation. Blocked culverts caused local flooding and abandoned compounds which the soldiers had intended to occupy as patrol bases were ‘literally washed away’. The plan to definitively clear the route from Shirin Jan junction to Abdul Wahid Kalay had to be delayed as Royal Engineers, with local contractors, ended up acting as flood defence wardens. The rains eventually abated and the village was finally cleared of all legacy IEDs. The response to this expulsion of the Taliban surprised even the guardsmen. A bi-weekly local market which had not been held for the previous eighteen months was spontaneously revived. On this occasion, the adage that there could be no development without security seemed to be confirmed.

The motivations behind these switches of allegiance and mood, however, were always far more complicated. The Inkerman Company Commander had a shrewd idea of who was leading the insurgent resistance in Addul Wahid Kalay. He was a local man named Mullah Ismael. Rather than confront him, the guardsman had chosen to cultivate him, patiently,

over a series of weeks. This tactic seemed to pay off. When the village was finally secured Mullah Ismael pompously escorted the officer around the settlement in a show of unity for a British television crew. This media coup almost backfired when the television crew then openly told the two-faced mullah that the British thought he was on the Taliban side. The ‘somewhat aghast’ guardsman was relieved when Mullah Ismael displayed a characteristic Afghan sense of humour and laughed the whole thing off.

The British had hoped that the fighting phase of Operation Moshtarak would be concluded swiftly and bloodlessly and this wish came to pass. Just one Hellfire missile was launched in the entire operation. No bombs were dropped and the guns stayed silent. Not a single civilian was killed. This was a vindication of an approach that prized subtlety over brute force and words over bullets. Within twenty-four hours the British were convening shuras to explain to the locals the purpose of their presence and their intentions for the future. The shura at Showal was attended by about 150 Kharotei, an indication that this former Taliban enclave was at least prepared to listen to the foreigners. In the bazaar in Showal, bomb disposal teams had to clear twenty-nine IEDs. Further route clearance operations were undertaken and more caches were uncovered (the Royal Welsh found thirteen IEDs in one compound alone). Patrol bases were built alongside the newly invested villages and on major track junctions. In total, twenty-four new checkpoints and PBs would be built. Patrols were sent out to map the ‘human terrain’, the laborious process of trying to find out who exactly lived in which compounds and where their loyalties lay. This was what the British called ‘hot stabilisation’ and was crucial to reinforcing a perception in the local tribes that this time government forces had come to stay. It was unsurprising that when Brigadier Cowan returned from his first shura he was reported to be ‘very pleased’.

This success did not foster complacency. General Messenger cautiously warned:

‘Everyone understands that what has happened over the last 24-48 hours is the easy bit. The hard bit, the challenge, is the enduring effort, is delivering the security which allows the Afghans to start providing for their people.’

These warnings aside, it was unarguably the case that the first phase of Operation Moshtarak had been concluded with remarkable success.

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Operation Moshtarak was not entirely bloodless. On 26 February a patrol of the Brigade Reconnaissance Force (BRF) mounted in Jackals struck an IED that killed

Sergeant Paul Fox, a sapper. The bombers returned that evening not realizing that the track where they had laid the IED was under surveillance from a ground camera. The soldiers were naturally eager to catch the men who had killed their comrade that morning and launched a Desert Hawk UAV to confirm that these were insurgents and not innocent locals. The mini-UAV did its job and an armed Predator was despatched to observe the men. Patience was then rewarded. Rather than attack the three men, they were followed back to a nearby compound. Later that night a further three insurgents arrived on motorbikes and a sentry was posted. The soldiers now knew, beyond any doubt, that the men were Taliban and almost certainly the very insurgents who had killed Sergeant Fox. What followed demonstrated how speed and decisiveness, rather than the usual caution, could reap dividends. The BRF, aided by Afghan soldiers from Task Force 444, mounted a dawn raid on the compound. The Taliban sentry spotted the approaching soldiers and opened fire with a machine gun. He was killed along with a second sentry. Inside the compound a further four insurgents were killed. Two wounded insurgents that managed to flee north were captured and evacuated to Camp Bastion field hospital. Inside the compound the soldiers found a treasure trove of material which would have been destroyed if a decision had been taken to simply flatten the compound with a rocket or bomb.

In a sure sign that the British were finally managing their operations coherently across government departments, Bob Ainsworth the Defence Secretary, accompanied by Douglas Alexander the International Development Secretary, visited Nad-e Ali.[924] This was the first occasion that a British Defence Secretary had travelled to Helmand in the immediate aftermath of an operation and the signal it sent was important. He was taken on a tour of Khowshal Kalay, seized by C (Essex) Company 1 Royal Anglian just two weeks previously. Ainsworth came with good words: ‘I think our military are to be congratulated on what they’ve managed to achieve in very difficult circumstances,’ adding, ‘there are discussions going on with people, there’s help and assistance going in, and the whole atmospherics are very good’.[925] Alexander arrived with the money - £28 million to be disbursed in reconstruction and development over the next three years. This was, in Rory Stewart’s apt phrase, the ‘electro-shock of stupendous resources as we rush for the exit’. [926]

Good atmospherics in Helmand were always relative and cleared areas were soon re-infiltrated by the Taliban. It was just a question of when and in what strength. Showal bazaar would be prematurely described as ‘bustling’, but in fact, this same positive

narrative was still being recycled two years later, and the truth was that Showal remained, to the day the British left, a run-down shit-hole. When the British sought to clear Route Dorset of IEDs – a waterlogged track that ran a matter of a few kilometres between two patrol bases – the operation took twenty-three days. One month after the conclusion of the fighting phase of Operation Moshtarak the Royal Welsh would make the biggest discovery of IEDs ever recorded in Helmand.[927] The circumstances of the find exemplified the fluid situation that still existed in ostensibly Taliban-free areas. B Company had been patrolling in Nad-e Ali when they came under 'a barrage of small arms fire'. After identifying a number of possible firing points a UAV was despatched to observe the area. Four men were seen acting suspiciously in a compound and the soldiers moved forward to investigate. Hidden under fertiliser sacks and stacks of dry poppies were components capable of making hundreds of IEDs.

A Company made an even more fortuitous discovery. Lieutenant Chris Annear had been leading his fusiliers across fields when they alighted on an elderly man. The subaltern routinely asked the man whether he knew the location of any IEDs, expecting either denial of any knowledge of IEDs, or perhaps the helpful but vague indication of an IED buried in a nearby track. To his surprise the old man told the subaltern that the three compounds in front of them were full of IEDs. The tip-off proved spectacular. When the search was concluded the soldiers counted 260 IEDs, thirty-eight detonators, and fifty-seven weapons of different types – the single biggest haul made by any British platoon. This was IED manufacture on an industrial scale. 'We couldn't believe our eyes', Annear reported. While a find of this magnitude was undeniably a setback for the Taliban it only amounted to a small proportion of the total quantity of IEDs manufactured and buried in Helmand. As many as twenty IEDs were being reported *every day*, and this was only counting the devices that the soldiers were uncovering. Annear and his fusiliers had found around two weeks' worth of IEDs, in one area only. The true figure of emplaced IEDs was much higher.

What did Moshtarak achieve and what was learnt? Several months of careful preparation had been rewarded. The military outcome had always been subordinated to the main effort which was to protect the people and not to kill insurgents. The two governors, Mangal and Habibullah, had been intimately engaged throughout the planning process. Local advice had been assiduously sought. As one officer explained:

'We asked the district governor to identify the most important villages, the most important routes, and what would define normalcy [in our area of operations], and these

three things became our objectives.'[928]

The brigade drew up a list of eighteen indicators of success, and the first six all related to governance.[929] The British had successfully followed up the military operation with 'government in a box' (a phrase reportedly coined by General McChrystal, although some questioned whether it mutated too easily into 'government in a coffin'). This was a dramatic change of attitude to just two years previously when a British brigade might have judged the success of an operation by the body count.

In other areas the operation fell short, but not for want of trying. The long term plan for the Chah-e Anjir Triangle was to build a series of patrol bases in the area based on 'the rule of three'. This rule prescribed that for every ISAF soldier the Afghans would supply one further soldier and one policeman. It was only by drawing on local manpower that the British and Americans could hope to satisfy the 'Petraeus Algorithm' (a rough calculation that for every 1,000 inhabitants there should be twenty-five soldiers). The British could only realistically deploy three companies in the newly-cleared area so it was imperative that the Afghans supplied the additional manpower. This was where the plan began to unravel. The existing police in Nad-e Ali were universally detested by the locals and untrustworthy. To make up the numbers, 450 National Civil Order Police (ANCOP), supported by 150 Narcotics Police were drafted into the district.[930] Many of these policemen came from as far away as Kabul. They may have been relatively honest but they were always going to represent a temporary solution. The situation with the ANA was equally unsatisfactory. Only two of five promised kandaks were actually made available. Each of these should have been roughly 100 strong but due to desertions and poor man-management they were typically half this strength. As in so many previous occasions, the British found that they were still fighting the war on behalf of the Afghans.

There was also a certain triumph of hope over experience. As in many operations already described in this book, commanding officers genuinely believed they had succeeded in seeing off the enemy, and viewed the future with optimism. 1 Royal Welsh, understandably, was proud of its contribution and keenly promoted its role in Moshtarak. But the assessment that the insurgents had been decisively pushed out proved significantly over-optimistic. The 'CAT' would be fought over for another year, and then gradually handed over to the ANSF. It may have come as a disappointment to Lieutenant Colonel Lock to learn that every settlement he seized in the winter of 2010, eventually lapsed from government control. Showal, predictably, once again became an insurgent-run drugs bazaar.

The British at least could congratulate themselves that their part of Operation Moshtarak had unfolded smoothly. In the south, US marines were discovering that Marjah was a much harder nut to crack. There was a suggestion that this was partly the result of a lack of preparation and experience. The British, effectively, had enjoyed a year's head start on the Americans and it seemed to show. A survey conducted by ICOS (the International Council on Security and Development), in March 2010, painted a bleak picture of Marjah. Field research was always problematic in Helmand (this survey only managed to poll 400 respondents), but overall trends could not be casually ignored. Over 70 per cent of interviewees wanted ISAF forces to leave their areas. Around 60 per cent believed that the Taliban would return (hardly a surprising finding as many were relatives returning to their village compounds anyway). A staggering 95 per cent judged that the Taliban were now attracting more, not less recruits. It was no wonder that General McChrystal would soon be describing Marjah as 'a festering sore'.

This verdict was perhaps harsh. Marjah hosted one of the large drug bazaars in Helmand – Loy Chareh. The insurgent presence was strong. Perhaps as many as 400 Taliban and associated narcotics traffickers had established themselves in this lawless district.[931] The overall commander of insurgent gangs in Marjah, Mullah Abdul Qayoum Zakir, was a determined and wily opponent. 3/6 and 1/6 Marines were severely constrained in their use of firepower to avoid civilian casualties (it appears wisely, as on the single occasion when authority was given to launch a GMLRS strike, it did indeed cause civilian casualties). All these factors, combined with a terrain that favoured the insurgents, complicated the investment of this district.

When Brigadier Cowan handed over command of Task Force Helmand on 10 April his verdict was honest and measured:

'In a population-centred counter-insurgency, empowering the people is essential. The local leaders are the people who should lead on achieving security and through the district governors we have been creating a comprehensive network of village security shuras so every community is responsible for its own destiny. This is a hard fight and it will continue to remain so. This is not a campaign that anyone expects to win anytime soon.'[932]

To support this strategy of 'protected communities' the Royal Engineers had built twenty-two new patrol bases, eighty-eight check points and sixty-one sangars, a phenomenal achievement of military engineering.[933] A further sixteen bridges were

constructed, opening routes for the locals and soldiers alike.

The winter fighting season had not proved to be a respite. The task force suffered sixty-one fatalities and around 1,000 wounded. This tally included twelve medics wounded while attempting to save the lives of stricken soldiers.[934] In a district like Babaji, where the task force was now expanding its presence, fatalities doubled and the number of wounded tripled. A measure of the busyness of the medical teams can be gauged by the humble but vital role played by the ambulance crews at Bastion helipad that ferried the casualties from incoming helicopters across the short strip to the hospital. Over the course of six months they made this urgent journey 2,614 times.[935]

On average, the brigade had mounted around 400 patrols a week and one in four of these had resulted in a TiC (Troops in Contact), a euphemism for a gunfight. One in eight patrols had encountered IEDs. Despite the policy of 'courageous restraint', ammunition expenditure had been colossal. There had been 258 breach operations alone (using explosive entry to search a compound).[936] The average village in Nad-e Ali or Babaji comprised of less than 100 compounds. The British had effectively damaged two villages' worth of compounds in the course of their operations just through this technique alone. By the Christmas of 2009, the US Army and Marines had deployed six GMLRS (Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System) and nineteen HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket System) to Helmand. The British had just four GMLRS launchers.[937] But the ammunition expenditure told a very different story. By the autumn of that year, a total of 1,433 rockets had been launched in Helmand. The US Army had launched 707 rockets (49 per cent of the total) and the US Marines had launched just 70 (five per cent). The Royal Artillery, with its mere four launchers accounted for 656 rockets, or 45 percent of the total. By the time the British withdrew GMLRS from Helmand in 2012-13, the battery had launched 821 rockets, or a third of all the rockets fired in Afghanistan.[938] A GMLRS rocket was priced at roughly $300,000 per shot. A quarter of a billion pounds in rocketry had been expended to take out Taliban firing points - an awfully expensive way to wage war. The task force could have bought off Helmand's farmers for this money, and pocketed some of the change. This contrasted with the miserly funds given to commanders to pursue Quick Impact Projects. Lieutenant Colonel Tootal, on Operation Herrick 4, had received just $250 – a ridiculous and insulting sum of money. By Operation Herrick 11, commanding officers were being allocated $5,000 per month as part of a Commander's Stabilisation Fund (or about 1/40,000th of the sum spent on rockets to date), but were reporting that the bureaucratic rules governing the use of these funds were still far too strict, hampering their

efforts to spend the money.

The same pattern was repeated with the armed MQ-9 Reaper UAVs. By 2012, Britain's five Reapers had launched 293 AGM-114 Hellfire missiles and dropped 52 Paveway bombs. This amounted to a strike for every 120 hours of flight.[939] ISAF figures showed that in 2012 there had been 333 missiles or bombs released from 3,600 missions (9.8 per cent of the total). Over a three year period, there had been a steady rise in the number of UAV strikes from 255 in 2009 (6 per cent of missions); to 278 in 2010 (5.5 per cent); to 294 in 2011 (5.5 per cent).[940] This implied that Britain's small fleet of five Reapers had accounted for almost one quarter of all UAV weapon releases. The cliché that the Americans used firepower and the British used 'soft power' was disproved by these figures.[941]

Even if only half of rockets and missiles had been directed at a building, the numbers also implied that these systems alone had destroyed or damaged a substantial number of compounds – certainly a much larger number, for example, than the schools or clinics the British had built or refurbished. GMLRS and Reaper only accounted for a proportion of the destruction. The first Operation Herrick reckoned that it expended over one million pounds of high explosives. 3 Commando Brigade doubled this amount. 12 Mechanised Brigade almost certainly tripled it, and it was only in 2009 that 'courageous restraint' began to be applied. Whether the British liked to admit it or not, localised areas of Helmand had suffered significant war damage, and destruction still far outpaced reconstruction by a country mile. This 'guns to butter ratio' was wildly imbalanced, and the cost of the guns was eye-watering.

The cost of the war not only spiralled by the winter of 2009; now the purse-holders had become infected by an end-of-term carelessness. Only a blind optimist believed that the incumbent Labour government could win the next general election. In the Brown government's last months in power financial restraint seemed to fly out of the window, a situation perhaps exploited by the MOD foreseeing tougher times ahead. Determining the true cost of the war meant dipping into three budgets: the core defence budget, the Treasury's reserve budget, and a fudge budget in which the Treasury bore the initial costs from its reserves on the promise that the MOD would repay the funds over the longer term from its core budget. This complicated arrangement was incitement to accounting sleights of hand as officials sought to shift costly items between budgets, always deferring the true cost to the bankrupted core defence budget. In this financial freefall, amazingly, no agreement existed between the Treasury and the MOD on the final size of the total

defence budget. Like an uncapped well, money just kept gushing out of the system to the possible private delight of service chiefs who had never experienced such largesse in their entire military careers, and to the despair of Treasury officials who could see the day of reckoning could not be postponed forever.

According to the MOD the cost of the war in Afghanistan had been estimated at £3.754 billion over 2009-10.[942] A similar amount had been requested for the following financial year but critics pointed out that this was an under-estimation of costs by at least £1 billion. In 2008-09 the MOD had spent £1.4 billion in Urgent Operational Requirements (UORs), funded from the Treasury Reserve. These were funds mainly used to buy new and better American vehicles, UAVs and counter-IED equipment. In 2009-10 this figure was matched (£1.5 billion). The reason why the UOR budget just kept growing, after the bulk of new equipments had already been procured, was because this very same budget was now being used to fund the maintenance, repair and replacement of this vast new inventory of kit. MOD officials made the rational calculation that the simplest way to balance their books was to keep declaring the new infantry carrier or the latest missile variant as a UOR and not take these items 'into core'. The success of this ruse can be gauged by the fact that in 2009-10 the MOD had promised to pay back a mere £150 million to the Treasury reserve fund in 2012-14.[943] The remainder of the expenditure was being kept firmly within the UOR budget and therefore off the Ministry's books.

Lack of financial restraint was mirrored by a lack of restraint on the frontline. The expensive 'toys for boys' were never going to remain in their packaging cases. For the first time since the Second World War, the British Army was awash in a sea of new kit. Rigour and critical assessment of real needs flew out the window. Vehicles were bought that were not required and which never left patrol bases (the Springer, for example), and others proved frankly so dangerous to their occupants they were abandoned (the Pinzgauer). Multiple vehicles were procured that essentially fell in the same class and fulfilled the same roles: the Panther, the Husky and the Ridgback. A hugely expensive (and necessary) program to buy a new fleet of smart MAN trucks spilled over and additional truck types were procured anyway. The vulnerability of the Jackal to roadside IEDs meant that it went through three variants very quickly, Jackal 1, 2 and 2A. In this climate of financial plenty the earlier variants were simply allowed to run down – there was no budget to maintain the vehicles which were eventually scrapped.

Cowan was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his leadership of 11 Light Brigade. That such awards were routinely handed out to senior British officers did not

lessen the merit that was attached to this particular award. There was an irony that after four years of trying the British had finally got it right, even as they were preparing to relinquish responsibility for all but three districts in Helmand to the US Marine Corps. 11 Light Brigade could not redeem the previous wasted years, but the brigade could and did set the foundations for a dignified withdrawal. Over the course of their six month tour Cowan's men racked up the gallantry awards. 'Courageous restraint' did not imply lack of courage. Five Conspicuous Gallantry Crosses, eighteen Military Crosses, three Distinguished Flying Crosses and seven Queen's Gallantry Medals were awarded to the brigade. Thirty-eight soldiers were mentioned in despatches and twelve received Queen's Commendations for Bravery. Acting Corporal Sarah Louise Bushbye of the Royal Army Medical Corps was one of the Military Cross recipients, the third servicewoman to receive this award. Sixty-three of the awards went to the infantry, five of which were posthumous, demonstrating that in other respects nothing had changed. The war was being carried, as in the past, by the poor, bloody infantry.

Cowan's replacement was Brigadier Richard Felton, an officer whose career bridged the recent history of the British Army. Felton was originally commissioned into the Gloucestershire Regiment. The 'Glorious Gloucesters' made their famous last stand against a Chinese division on the Imjin River but were unable to make a similar heroic stand against Treasury cuts. Like so many county regiments on which Britain's fortunes rested in past wars the Gloucestershire Regiment disappeared within a larger merged regiment that barely lasted another decade before it too was culled.[944] By this time Felton had served in Northern Ireland and in Bosnia as Chief of Staff in 7 Armoured Brigade. In 1998 he took the decision to transfer to the most modern part of the army, the Army Air Corps. This implied long courses rather than promotion, but by the following year he had assumed command of 669 Squadron. Staff appointments followed and in 2003 he volunteered to undertake the arduous Apache conversion course, the first of its type. He passed out in April 2004 and assumed command of 9 Regiment. The timing could not have been more fortuitous. Two years later he was commanding the Joint Helicopter Force on Operation Herrick 4. Two promotions followed and now Felton found himself in the unusual position of being Britain's first Army Air Corps brigadier in command of a mechanised brigade, in a war.

4 Mechanised Brigade, or 'The Black Rats', owed its lineage to the original Desert Rats. This famous division had originally comprised of a light armoured cars brigade that eventually became 7 Armoured Brigade, and a heavy brigade, 4 Armoured Brigade. The

heavier brigade was equipped with Cruiser tanks and consisted of 1 and 6 Royal Tank Regiments. Decimation in battle and other re-organisations would jumble up the units but the original brigade designations stuck. The rat was in fact a desert jerboa, a symbol adopted at the beginning of 1940.

The brigade deployed on the eve of the most hotly contested and surreal British general election fought in a generation. Two weeks before the polling stations opened a volcanic eruption in Iceland encouraged a handful of British officials to cause more damage to the economies of the European Union than the September 11 attacks. As a result of a particle dispersion model used by the London-based Volcanic Ash Advisory Centre (originally designed to predict fallout from the nuclear accident at Chernobyl, another event whose effects were exaggerated) all flights were grounded across Europe for six days. Around seven million passengers found themselves inconvenienced and in many cases out of pocket. The total cost of this fiasco was estimated at over £2 billion. Since the 1950s, there had been just 126 reported incidents involving civil airliners flying into volcanic ash, of which just ten had resulted in partial or complete engine failure. None had resulted in a crash.[945] As one retired pilot observed, thousands of aircraft had flown through volcanic ash in the last half century of civil aviation, without even being aware that they had done so.[946] By contrast, every year, civil airliners experienced hundreds of incidents involving bird strikes, extreme weather events, or component malfunctions, some of which did result in accidents. In 2009 alone there were at least thirty-four civil airline crashes, including the widely reported Air France Flight 447 that went down over the Atlantic. None involved volcanic ash. This disproportionate British silliness over health and safety was never going to wash with disbelieving Europeans. First France and then Germany rebelled against the British judgement and these were soon followed by other European countries. Finally, the British Airways Chairman, frustrated by the damage that was being caused to the airline industry, seized the initiative and ordered his stranded aircraft to fly back to Britain. At the eleventh hour, even as the aircraft were approaching British airspace, the ban was lifted. It took this extreme behaviour to force common sense, but at a cost to the credibility of Britain’s civil air authorities.

This bizarre distraction provided only temporary respite for a Labour government which was nearing the end of its thirteen year hold on power. The 2010 general election witnessed the first television debates in British history. The surprising star of these shows was the Liberal-Democrat leader Nick Clegg. The Labour camp muttered about the importance of ‘substance over style’ but the British seemed to prefer style over substance.

In the event, the Labour Party was not wiped out and the Liberal-Democrats lost seats, but the Conservative Party, led by David Cameron, failed to gain a parliamentary majority, securing just 306 seats. As the three main parties scrambled to woo each other to form a coalition government, the country was again distracted by the nail-biting culmination of the football Premier League (won by Chelsea with an 8-0 thumping of Wigan, breaking several records along the way). Late in the evening on Tuesday 10 May, the incumbent Gordon Brown finally bowed to the inevitable and resigned his premiership with great dignity, in sharp contrast to the cattish swipe the previous Prime Minister's wife had delivered on leaving Downing Street. Released from the necessity to spin a war he did not start, the rock-faced Scotsman paid a moving tribute to the armed forces in his valedictory speech. Ironically it was in these last few minutes of his premiership that the private man Gordon Brown came to the fore, expressing the depth of his feelings over soldiers whose lives had been lost, 'in honour', as he put it. Perhaps Gordon Brown never did 'get the war', but he most certainly got its human sacrifice.

With a change of government came a new defence secretary and the man entrusted with this difficult post was another Scotsman, Dr Liam Fox. Conservative policy towards the war in Afghanistan in the run-up to the general election had been contradictory. In television interviews Fox had emphasised withdrawing as quickly as possible and handing over security responsibilities to the Afghans. His master, David Cameron, had preferred to offer the more statesman-like pledge that a British withdrawal would not be dictated by an artificial timetable but by results on the ground, unwisely holding himself hostage to an uncertain future. Now the Conservative defence secretary was in coalition with a Liberal-Democratic party whose views on defence were radically different to his own party's policies.

The coalition government wasted no time in addressing the Afghan war. Within a week of assuming power the new foreign secretary William Hague paid a visit to his American counterpart, Hillary Clinton. Clinton had been charmed by the previous foreign secretary, David Miliband (so youthful, she sighed). William Hague clearly deployed all his reserves of charm because the body language at the joint press conference was good. The 'special relationship' was safe under the novel arrangements for sharing power being concocted in Westminster. By the end of the month a high level delegation travelled to Helmand which was upstaged by the surprise visit of England's iconic footballer David Beckham. Defying the cliché that footballers are born with blessed feet but inarticulate tongues Beckham spoke as movingly as anyone at the memorial plinth at Camp Bastion. A patriot to his metatarsals, the former England captain boosted the morale of the troops in a way

politicians could only envy.

The reason for all this urgency was an imminent and significant change to the command arrangements in south-west Afghanistan. Just as in Normandy British commanders had bowed to the inevitable numerical ascendancy of American troops and leadership as the bridgehead expanded, so in Helmand the exclusively British war was about to become an American war, commanded by an American general.

Unlike Normandy, nobody was protesting. The army knew that it had ‘done its bit’ and could not hope to take the war any further without American help. British politicians carped about fairness, not without justification, as the British task force (with the Danes and Estonians) had almost single-handedly held the line in Afghanistan’s most violent province for four years. National posturing aside, the deadlock in Helmand could only be resolved by American reinforcement and this meant handing over command to the US Marine Corps. This corps had originally wheedled its way into Helmand in 2008 when it felt threatened and sidelined by the US Army in Iraq, unable to live with the intolerable situation of an American war in which it did not play a leading role. Now it had its wish. The ‘grunts’ were about to discover just why Helmand had become the most deadly frontline in Afghanistan.

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The new command arrangements were announced on 21 May. The old Regional Command (South) would be split into two headquarters. A new Regional Command (South-West) would assume responsibility for Helmand and Nimruz provinces (the latter a desert area with no ISAF presence). The new Regional Command (South) would now control the smaller but no less volatile Kandahar, Uruzgan, Daykundi and Zabul provinces. The Dutch had already quit and the Canadians were about to follow, so this would become an almost exclusively American command. On the ANA side, 215 Corps would be partnered by Regional Command (South-West) and 205 Corps would revert to Kandahar. Overall troop levels matched the split in command rising from 35,000 in October 2009 to over 50,000 by the summer of 2010. Major General Richard Mills (USMC) duly assumed command of Regional Command (South-West) but in an important concession to the British it was agreed that this command would rotate between an American and British general. Effectively, all of south-west Afghanistan would now be back under American leadership and this gave the campaign a coherence (and resources) that it had lacked in the last four years.

The key announcement, however, related to the allocation of district responsibilities in

Helmand. In a widely anticipated move it was announced that British troops would hand-over Battlegroup (North-West) to US marines. This area encompassed Kajaki and Sangin. First there would be an interim arrangement in which the British battlegroup (made up from 40 Commando) would fall under command of an American Regimental Combat Team (North), but now everyone knew the end was in sight. Astonishingly, reluctance to hand over Sangin to the US marines had come from the Brown government that feared a loss of reputation. Jack Fairweather has expressed this decision in polite terms: 'These political risks [being perceived to be cutting and running], they apparently calculated, were greater than those resulting from a few more British deaths in Sangin'.[947] The 'few more deaths' were the lives of fourteen marines. Their comrades would probably not have shared in this equation of death, or expressed themselves as politely.

The transfer in command took place on 1 June and by the end of the summer the British were out. Behind these new arrangements NATO was manoeuvring itself for an ultimate and final withdrawal. On 22-23 April a conference had been held in Tallin, Estonia. The theme of the conference was the handover of security to the Afghan Army and police. The idealistic agendas of previous conferences had been knocked sideways by the more pragmatic and pressing question of ending an inconclusive and unpopular war. The conference closed with a resolution to meet in Lisbon, in November, to present defined and concrete conditions for ISAF's withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The first steps of the British withdrawal took place at the end of June. Royal Marines who had wrested the mountain overlooking Kajaki dam in 2007 handed over their perch to American counterparts. FOB Zeebrugge would now be a US Marine Corps outpost.

The British experience at Kajaki had become a metaphor for everything that had gone wrong in the war. Paratroopers had initially been rushed there, at American insistence, on the grounds that the vital dam was about to over-run by Taliban. The intelligence was exaggerated and misjudged. There were five actors at Kajaki: the corrupt local police, the USPI guard force, the dam workers, genuine local insurgents and associated narcotics traffickers, and the villagers living in the shadow of the reservoir. There was a happy *modus vivendi* between these actors, not least because many were related and lived in the same villages. An American engineer had been working at the dam for several years, unthreatened by the 'Taliban'. The calm surface of the water was disturbed by the arrival of American troops conducting aggressive operations in northern Helmand (part of the futile series of operations conducted under the umbrella of Operation Mountain Thrust). Kajaki had suffered severely during the Afghan-Soviet War and evidence of that

occupation was everywhere. Memories were long. When villagers saw British paratroopers occupying former Russian trenches they needed little encouragement to start attacking the latest occupiers.

From the start the British were over-extended and this would remain a constant theme. An attempt was made to secure the dam with a platoon, but it soon became evident that at least an under-strength company was required at FOB Zeebrugge. This was all the British would ever be able to spare. The truth was that neither side had the strength to prevail in a confrontation. The locals took pot shots at the British and the British retaliated. No casualties were ever suffered at the dam. All the British fatalities were experienced when platoons sallied out to the adjoining villages to push back a front line that re-established itself as soon as they left. The majority were killed by IEDs. The dam workers, police and guard force never triggered IEDs. They knew where they had been emplaced, but nobody told the British. Over the course of four years tens of thousands of pounds of high explosives were expended in the few square kilometres surrounding the dam, to no purpose. One of the last British companies to serve at Kajaki recalled how an excursion to Pyramid Hill resulted in a gun fight in which the locals engaged from thirty-two different firing positions and from all six villages surrounding the hill[948] – the very same villages the marines had tried to clear in the winter of 2006-07. The company reported that this had been their ‘best’ gun fight of the tour, which perhaps was one of the roots of the problem. Too many had treated the whole business as a good game.

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There was no reconstruction. Mirroring the gross waste of aid across Afghanistan, a USAID-funded plan to install a third turbine at the dam was undertaken in the summer of 2008. It cost $200 million and the British would hail the operation to deliver the turbine as a logistic feat. It was, but it failed to add a volt of electricity to the power grid. The obvious and far more pressing need was the repair of the wooden road bridge that separated the villages north of the dam to markets in the Upper Sangin Valley. Reinforcing this bridge so that it could carry trucks would have transformed the lives of the locals and would have cost thousands, not millions of dollars. The British left with the bridge still rotting and the adjoining Tangye village, once a thriving bazaar, still deserted. Eventually, Tangye village would revert to being a drug bazaar, right under the noses of the US marines who encouraged its redevelopment. The other, more ambitious development need was an irrigation canal, which the Alizais requested for years, without any realistic hope of satisfaction. To the end, the soldiers were living off rations.

The withdrawal of the marines from Kajaki allowed Lieutenant Colonel Paul James, the commanding officer of 40 Commando, to concentrate his men in Sangin. James would be the last British officer to command troops in Sangin. He was ably helped in this difficult task by RSM Pelling who in 2007 had taken part in the abortive assault at Jugroom Fort. Pelling had been one of the bulwarks of that tour and his inner strength would be needed on this last tour. The fact that James was the last British commander in Sangin in a way liberated this officer from making the usual hollow statements over progress in the town. 'The greatest reason why there is instability in Sangin, he said, '… is the narcotics trade … We can just keep killing people every day but actually the only real way to overcome this is by sheer economics, by offering the youth better incentives, a better job, better education'.[949]

The marines' last tour of Sangin would be grim. As well as suffering fourteen fatalities, over fifty would be seriously injured, including another marine triple amputee joining Mark Ormerod from the first 3 Commando Brigade tour of Helmand. A 300 meter patrol was considered a good day.[950] Despite using even more sophisticated equipment the marines found their metal detectors missed eight out of ten IEDs.[951] In the worst hit troop in 40 Commando, two out of three casualties was a Vallon man.[952] Spotting ground sign was vital to survival. The value of 'courageous restraint' continued to raise heated discussion. The British had stopped using artillery in Sangin from December 2009. Was this improving the situation, or emboldening the insurgents? Towards the end of the tour Lieutenant Colonel James would change tactics and undertake more mobile operations, re-igniting the debate whether the British had fixed themselves in dispersed platoon bases. As a result of this tactical re-posturing he assessed that IED attacks halved and overall attacks fell to a third of their peak. Certainly, the commandos stopped losing men to attrition in isolated bases, which seemed to vindicate the approach. US marines would subsequently close half of the bases recently built by the British but suffer twice the casualty rate. Whatever postures commanders adopted, they faced terrible dilemmas. In the end, there were no easy tactical answers in Sangin.

40 Commando started their tour briskly, dressed in the new camouflage pattern combats (known as MTP, or Multi-Terrain Pattern, and based on a design pioneered by a Californian company), and sporting new weapons such as the 7.62mm American Sharpshooter rifle. A routine UAV mission in mid-May spotted suspicious activity in a deserted compound east of FOB Nolay and PB Jamil. The marines decided to follow up the lead and uncovered a cache of 40 kilograms of homemade explosive and some

weapons. Small successes like this could not hide the enormity of the challenge facing the commandos. James candidly admitted that his marines were ‘here to create time and space for governance to take hold’, adding, ‘It just takes hellishly long unless you have the right force density – that’s my concern, that we might be here 10 years rather than five years’. The fact was that he had barely four months to push before the marines would start packing their crates and preparing for the hand-over to American forces.

Like the Rifles before them, it was not long before the fatalities began to mount. The first killed was Corporal Christopher Harrison who died near PB Blenheim, shot by a sniper. He was followed by Corporal Stephen Walker who had previously saved the life of a fellow marine who had almost triggered a trip wire.

The insurgents had now grown brazen as well as canny. On 21 June the marines at PB Airport Lounge to the east of Sangin were relaxing. It was past 8pm and some of the marines had gathered at the makeshift gym in the evening cool. As they joked in their shorts and tee-shirts two homemade grenades flew over the patrol base wall. Marine Paul Warren was killed by a piece of shrapnel that entered his stomach. Two other marines were seriously injured.

Sangin continued to claim lives throughout June and July, whatever measures the marines took to avoid the IEDs. And now roadside bombs were not the only threat they faced as an active sniper who had harassed the previous battlegroup was still plying his deadly trade against the commandos. On 13 June, a patrol deployed to CP Marshall’s Post to help protect engineers blocking alleyways with razor wire to try to halt a tide of IEDs that was washing up against the walls of this isolated base. Marine Steven Birdsall was acting as a ladder sentry when he was hit by a single round in the head. He survived a further day before succumbing to his wound at Camp Bastion hospital. One marine officer expressed the frustration of street fighting in Sangin when he wrote:

‘We are like a boxer in the defensive position with his arms wrapped around his body protecting himself from the blows coming in and unable to throw any punches.’[953]

On occasions, the commandos survived remarkably close range encounters with their enemy. Lieutenant Jack Anrude was leading a patrol down an alleyway when a gunman sprang out and sprayed a magazine at the patrol. An ANA soldier standing alongside Anrude was hit five times in the legs, and Anrude himself was hit by a bullet and by fragments in his arm, head and legs. Despite his wounds Anrude continued to lead his patrol for the next four and half hours as they fought a running battle against the elusive

gunmen. When the casevac helicopter finally arrived the lieutenant carried the wounded Afghan to the waiting aircraft. Anrude simply recorded his lucky escape as ‘a surreal experience’. He was awarded a Military Cross for this action. Casevac helicopters that rushed to Sangin to evacuate casualties continued to run a gauntlet of fire, on occasions, with tragic consequences. On 9 June, an American Pedro beginning its final approach to FOB Jackson was struck in the tail by a suspected RPG. The rear rotor failed causing the aircraft to spin out of control and crash just 300 metres from Sangar 2. Five soldiers were killed and two were seriously injured.

Suicide attacks although rare continued to fray nerves. On 30 July a patrol stepped out of PB Hanjar to conduct a routine foot patrol. There were ten marines in the patrol and one interpreter who had taken a position at the back of the patrol. As the marines approached Route 611, just 100 metres from the patrol base, they crossed the path of an old man walking in the opposite direction. They had seen the man earlier in the patrol and thought nothing of him. White-bearded Afghans wandering along tracks were a common enough sight. But there was something about the old man that raised the suspicions of the interpreter – he was mumbling to himself. What the old man was uttering would never be known. The interpreter called out, the man stopped, faced the patrol, and detonated his suicide vest. Two marines were caught in the blast but both survived. After the marines left the area, children were paid by the Taliban to recover the suicide bomber’s body parts.

Despite the grimness of Sangin soldiers still found solace in moments when the human spirit seemed to rise above the violence. Sergeant Danny Smith was a qualified doctor and Royal Marine reservist serving at FOB Jackson. Over the course of his tour during which he was routinely dealing with multiple trauma injuries he took time to befriend a local boy:

‘I’ve met one young lad on quite a few occasions. He is from a little area south of Forward Operating Base Jackson … He’s quite keen on the English language. He carries this English book which he takes to some sort of tutor. Every time we meet up with him he throws an English phrase at me. I’ll answer him and he then takes a good 2 or 3 minutes to look up what to say back to me, but he’s picking up English quite well. We are trying to build up a little bit of a rapport with him and little bit of a conversation … I’m hoping that sooner or later we will bump into his parents.’[954]

Smith was surprised that some parents even allowed the marines to converse freely with young girls a change that he took as a sign that Sangin had become more accepting of foreigners:

‘We can even talk to the young females now, which is a massive step ahead. The parents let the girls talk to use [sic]. The fathers and parents of some of the children will sit on the side of the compound, while we’re talking to the kids, giving them sweets, getting the interpreters to translate things and they seem happy enough…’

Such moments were swiftly punctured by the reality of dealing with casualties, not all military. IEDs were indiscriminate and in a town like Sangin, civilians were equally likely to get caught by these devices. ‘We saw another personal tragedy wreaked upon the citizens of Afghanistan’, he wrote after one such incident, ‘A young mother and her children were blown up by an IED whilst walking along a street. One child was killed outright and she and her 4 year old son were badly hurt. The medical team at FOB Jackson were stood up and within two minutes an Afghan National Police Ford Ranger pulled up outside with the two casualties on board’. Both had multiple shrapnel wounds and broken bones. The two casualties were stabilized by Sergeant Smith and his nurses and evacuated to Camp Bastion hospital. They both survived.

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On 20 June another grim milestone was passed when the 300th British fatality from the war in Afghanistan died in Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham from wounds sustained in an IED strike. He was Marine Richard Hollington of B Company, 40 Commando. His death was announced just two days before the Conservative Chancellor, George Osborne, presented a budget to Parliament which included the most swingeing cuts in public expenditure in a generation. The media were quick to note that in the newly-dubbed ‘age of austerity’, Britain’s two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had cost the nation over £20 billion. The Blairite readiness to intervene in Muslim countries had proved, and was still proving, very expensive to the nation’s coffers. Did making Britain ‘safe from terrorism’ – a home-grown terrorism that the previous Labour government had arguably incited through participation in the American-Anglo invasion of Iraq – truly justify such a high cost in lives and treasure? Few in the summer of 2010 continued to believe so.

The bad news then worsened, from an entirely unexpected quarter. The front cover of that summer’s double issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine displayed a flamboyant popular singer named Lady Gaga sporting two automatic rifles for breasts, and little else. The contents of the magazine were no less eye-catching. Over a series of unguarded moments with freelance journalist Michael Hastings, General McChrystal and his staff had given a highly damaging insight into the poisonous web of relationships at the top of the American national security apparatus. McChrystal had already tested President Obama’s

patience twice in the previous year. During the period of consultation over a new strategy in Afghanistan details of McChrystal's preferred strategy had been leaked to the media (but not by the general or his staffs). The leaks had been exacerbated by a speech delivered in London in which McChrystal seemed to throw a gauntlet down to his political masters to back him or sack him. The October speech drew a panicked response from the White House and a staged meeting between the President and his general. If the President's staff hoped the wayward McChrystal would now conform they were hoping against human nature.

McChrystal incarnated an important truth about generalship. In high command, a competent military professional is insufficient. A truly successful general also needs to be a showman and celebrity - an icon to his troops. The McChrystal personality cult, fanned by his acolytes, had swept through ISAF and re-invigorated the moribund organisation. No other general - and the war had seen off five American generals - had managed to capture the imagination of the troops. 'The McChrystal Plan' was on everybody's lips, like a magic invocation that would deliver victory, or on most lips. Some argued that the new strategy of 'courageous restraint' was strengthening rather than weakening the Taliban.

Whichever side was right, the novelty of this hypnotic mantra was actually over-sold. There was little that was essentially new in 'the McChrystal Plan'. Other senior officers – including two British officers, Mackay and Richards – had tried to promote similar counter-insurgency strategies but without lasting success. The difference with McChrystal was that he made it happen through sheer force of personality and a grinding work ethic. The 'warrior monk' who reputedly ran eight miles every morning and lived on four hours sleep a day was seen as the dynamo that would at last provide the charge to the flickering campaign. The war in Afghanistan had become McChrystal's war, as personal a fight as MacArthur's war in Korea and no less combustible.

Behind this confidence, it appeared, was a frustrated personality who had grown increasingly impatient over dissent with 'his war' and who openly belittled his peers. Nobody escaped criticism in the explosive magazine article aptly entitled 'The Runaway General'. The President, the Vice-President, the US Ambassador and the President's security advisors were all derided by McChrystal and his staff. An impression was created of a clique of myopic and juvenile special force officers, contemptuous of their civilian counterparts, and not afraid to say so in public. The hard drinking and hard living portrayal of McChrystal's 'Team America' was an embarrassment. The oafish reference to a dinner with a French minister as 'fucking gay' showed the worst side of American

culture. This last sideswipe was largely ignored by an American media more concerned with insult to their President. McChrystal, a professed Obama supporter, was paradoxically an all-American hero to the right-wing of an increasingly semi-hysterical Republican Party that bathed in the waters of Fox News and promoted organisations like the Tea Party Movement. To this constituency – which included many members of the US Army – an intelligent, black, Democrat president was an historical aberration. As well as being openly insulting to the national leadership, McChrystal and his staff had unintentionally shone a light on the divisions in the American body politic. These and other tensions would later be exposed in great detail in journalist Bob Woodward's *Obama's Wars*, and in Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan*.

McChrystal had to go. He had violated the fundamental relationship between civilian and military leaders in a democratic society. The sadness was that the obsessed and driven McChrystal, who had spent the last nine years of his life almost continuously at war, did represent ISAF's best hope of success. McChrystal was the great *entr'acte* of the war. MacArthur had been an indifferent general but a tireless self-promoter. McChrystal could point to genuine accomplishment in Iraq. His military record in two intractably difficult wars was unimpeachable. There *was* no better American general than Stanley McChrystal, a point made starkly evident as the White House scrambled to find a replacement. Summoned back to Washington he handed in his resignation after a half hour private meeting with President Obama. The resignation letter was brusque, offered no apology to the insulted, and spoke instead of the importance of the mission. To the last McChrystal remained the committed soldier. With no obvious replacement, the White House fell back on submitting the candidacy of General Petraeus to Congress (which implied a step down for the sixty-two year old who was holding the post of CENTCOM commander). In the interim, Lieutenant General Nick Parker found himself in charge of the biggest land force commanded by a British general since the Second World War. The Taliban, predictably, celebrated the scandal.

McChrystal's departure came in a bad week for President Obama. Already being cast as a weak president over his handling of a large oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the total number of American fatalities in Afghanistan exceeded the 1,000 mark in the month of June. *The Economist* that same week led with a banner headline 'Losing in Afghanistan'. McChrystal would have agreed. One of the general's most appealing traits had been an unflinching honesty. If politicians could not bear very much reality, McChrystal had never shied from seeing the situation as it was and not as public relations machines chose to

portray the war to Western electorates. He had famously been the general who descended on company and platoon locations and held open debates over what was going wrong with the war (a practice that no British general would have copied). On the eve of his departure he had presented ISAF with a bleak assessment of the war – his war – which was a model of honesty and which contradicted the narrative of progress that the organisation was trying to promote. In a survey of 122 contested districts, only five were judged to be under 'full authority' of the Afghan government.[955] Fifteen districts had no governance at all, and governance was judged to be 'dysfunctional' in another twenty-nine. In forty-five districts governance was 'unproductive' which almost invariably implied corruption.

Corruption was precisely the quicksand in which the ISAF mission was sinking. The problem was not that the Taliban were strong but rather that the government was weak, discredited and corrupt. A study undertaken by the UNODC found that half of the interviewees had paid a bribe in the last twelve months. The average hand-out was $160, or a third of the annual average GDP per head in Afghanistan.[956] The total number of bribes paid out possibly exceeded $2.5 billion, or a quarter of the estimated value of the licit economy. Not only was the government thoroughly corrupt but it was almost entirely propped up by foreign donations, much like the Soviet-sponsored Afghan government that collapsed once the source of funds dried up. The war that McChrystal was handing over to Petraeus was not going well and in his final assessment he characteristically and honestly said so.

For the British, the worsening situation was emphasised by the sudden spike in casualties. In one week in June, eleven soldiers and marines were killed. Four soldiers serving with 1 Mercians (Cheshires) drowned at night in a ghastly road accident: Colour Sergeant Martyn Horton, Lance Corporal David Ramsden, Private Douglas Halliday, and Private Alex Isaac. Horton left behind a nine-year old son and infant step daughter. Ramsden had left the army but decided to re-enlist as a Reservist and serve a tour in Afghanistan. In Sangin, marines continued to fall to sniper fire and IEDs. In early July, Sergeant Talib Hussein, an ANA soldier based at PB 3 in Babaji District, murdered the British company commander, Major Joshua Bowman, in his sleep. He then entered the operations room and killed the two soldiers manning the radios, Lieutenant Neal Turkington, an Ulsterman, and Corporal Arjun Purja Pun, a Gurkha. The assailant fled into the night and got away. Hussein was a shi'ite Hazara who had just returned from six weeks leave, raising the possibility of Iranian involvement. The Taliban, who in the past had massacred Hazaras, naturally claimed him as their own.

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In the winter of 2007 Rory Stewart had presciently observed that policymakers, 'worried about lack of progress, are in danger of flipping from troop increase to flight'.[957] This prophecy appeared to be unfolding. McChrystal's resignation coincided with the long-term transition from a counter-insurgency campaign to a counter-terrorist campaign favoured by Vice-President Biden. Prime Minister Cameron reiterated that British troops would quit Afghanistan by 2015, while General Richards hinted that peace talks should start at once. The Pentagon continued to promote the fallacy that although the war was not winnable in a conventional sense, the Taliban were beatable, and beating the Taliban was an essential precursor to successful negotiations and withdrawal. This was the same fallacy promoted in the long and painful withdrawal from Vietnam. Both President Obama and Biden favoured a limited counter-terrorist war, but simultaneously wanted the counter-insurgency war to succeed. The former implied chasing a target that had long dispersed and mutated into a wider regional and global phenomenon, and the latter was never going to succeed, as much as anything, because a political will to win had evaporated. As if to confirm the weakening political will, Japanese, American and European donor countries all suspended or withheld over $8 billion of aid money within the space of six weeks.

At least – it seemed – special force operations were reaping success. On assuming command General Petraeus informed his Congressional interrogators that covert operations - the controversial 'night raids' - had killed or captured 130 Taliban commanders in the previous four months. This had all the hallmarks of a McChrystal-inspired strategy of industrial-level special operations. Hitting at least one target every night had been a McChrystal mantra and the figures suggested that this target was being over-achieved. From February 2009 to December 2010, there was a five-fold increase in night raids. Over one three months period, an average of around twenty raids was being conducted *every night*. In April, over a 24 hour period, as many as forty raids had been undertaken.[958] ISAF claimed that eight out of ten raids succeeded in capturing or killing an insurgent commander, but critics were less sure. The Soviets had followed the same strategy, relying less on their motor rifle troops and placing more emphasis on *Spetznaz* operations. By the end of the war, about 20 per cent of the Soviet Army comprised of special force units, and Russian commandos were scoring significant successes - but the war was still lost. The same outcome faced ISAF however soothing high enemy body counts sounded to worried Congressional ears. There was a certain amount of national chest-thumping in the media over these numbers but the truth was that the majority of the

‘downed’ commanders were mid or low level figures. The success rate against ‘Tier 1 Taliban’ was much less impressive. Lost commanders were replaced within one or two weeks and the disruption to insurgent networks was always transient and ‘reversible’ – a phrase frequently repeated as ISAF began to withdraw.

There was also a dark side to this relentless special force campaign that had already been alluded to by Mark Urban in his book *Task Force Black*, describing the special force campaign in Iraq. In a war where special force teams were being asked to undertake arrest operations every twenty-four hours, there was little or no time to thoroughly reconnoitre and observe the target before executing the operation. As a result, in Iraq, US special forces and 22 SAS killed or injured a not insignificant number of innocent civilians in the course of their operations. The true figures would never be known and the violence in Baghdad served to brutalise moral compasses in that ‘dirty war’. How many innocent Afghans were now being caught up in special force raids could only be guessed.

The withdrawal of the marines from Kajaki was followed by an unsurprising but eagerly awaited announcement. On 7 July, the Defence Secretary Liam Fox rose to the despatch box and informed the House of Commons that British troops would be handing over Sangin to US marines. The significance of the announcement escaped no one. This was the great symbolic step in the British withdrawal from Helmand Province. Sangin – the very name had become etched in British Army folklore – was being surrendered. This was the town that British troops had entered thoughtlessly and precipitously in the summer of 2006. A two day mission turned into a costly ‘platoon house’ siege. A staff officer serving with the brigade had resigned over the stupidity of the act. The town elders had begged the British to leave because their presence would only inflame an already simmering inter-tribal conflict. Four years later the British reaped the reward the elders predicted. Despite Fox’s claim that the British were leaving Sangin ‘a better place’, by every measure, Sangin was a much worse place.

When the British first deployed to Sangin there was sporadic fighting between Alikozai and Ishaqzai tribesmen as well as great local indignation over the corrupt police chief. This internecine squabble over control of the narcotics trade had been running for several years. There was little a single paratrooper company could do to arbitrate the situation let alone impose order. The paratroopers themselves were mostly ignorant of the complex tribal dynamics of Sangin. Inevitably, the tribes united and turned on the foreign soldiers, impelled by an Afghan cultural reflex towards any foreign interference. There was no true Taliban presence in Sangin in 2006, just ex-mujahidin, narcotics traffickers, and

unemployed, local men, willing to pick up a gun for a wage. The town was not about to fall to a Taliban army as some imagined at the time and later claimed to justify the British presence. But the arrival of British troops in the heart of Helmand's narcotics trade acted as a magnet for the insurgency. Over four years Sangin became the most densely IED-infested spot in the world. It became impossible to walk anywhere without a metal detector. Routes such as Pharmacy Road became infamous and cost the lives of or injured dozens of soldiers. Much like the Sunni triangle in Iraq, Sangin became a crucible and laboratory for insurgency techniques: command wire and command pull IEDs, sniping attacks, multiple, complex ambushes and more. Foreign fighters flocked to the place: Chechens, Arabs, Turks, Uzbeks, Pakistanis and Kurds. Although it was never possible to accurately determine just how many insurgents had been drawn to the fighting in Sangin there was sufficient evidence that there were never enough British soldiers to match the numbers of insurgents who remained numerically stronger throughout the battle for the town.

One third of all British casualties were suffered in Sangin at the time of withdrawal but this figure was misleading. Less than 10 per cent of the task force was based in Sangin. When fatality figures for districts already handed over to American forces were subtracted from the total British fatality number it was evident that over half of all British casualties were being experienced in this town. By proportion to deployed numbers and in absolute terms Sangin was, by some distance, the most dangerous place to serve in Helmand Province. Over one hundred British soldiers and marines died in Sangin. Withdrawal from Sangin offered the tempting political prize of an automatic halving of British casualties, which is what happened. Accurate insurgent casualties were always impossible to determine. A conservative estimate would suggest that between five to ten insurgents were killed for every British fatality. Halfway through the war the British observed an insurgent funeral. There were over fifty mourners. If the British killed 1,000 insurgents in Sangin, they made many thousands more enemies. Reconstruction was minimal and confined to the immediate environs of the District Centre, which was the only area where the British were safe. The often touted argument that the bazaar had revived was false. There were three bazaars in Sangin: the Route 611 bazaars which mostly missed the fighting; a bazaar north of the Sangin wadi which was temporarily abandoned during the heaviest fighting; and a square bazaar close to the District Centre which was abandoned and badly damaged. The latter never fully recovered and mostly remained in ruins when the British departed.

The hand-over finally took place at 6.30am on 20 September with 3/7 Marines. The last British gun in Sangin was manned by 3/29 (Corunna) Battery. The American marines

brought heavier 155mm artillery pieces, which they were quick to use. There was no great fanfare. The Defence Secretary and several senior officers spoke of the British sacrifice in the town but a departing marine simply said that he felt ‘hollow’. Another laconically remarked that ‘they’re welcome to it’. The US marines immediately began closing down a number of the small bases which the British (principally 3 Rifles) had erected, arguing that this policy had effectively fixed the British. Restoring mobility to the battlefield, the very argument that had raged in the summer of 2006, had still not been settled.

Ironically, the British ended up exactly where they started - stuck in a building leased from one of Sangin’s prominent narcotics barons. They left as they arrived, by helicopter, not daring to test the veracity of the re-named Avenue of Hope by attempting a road move through the town. The last British serviceman to die in Sangin was Marine Adam Brown, killed on 1 August. Like so many others, he died in the immediate vicinity of his patrol base after stepping on an IED. He left behind a widow, his childhood sweetheart.

The sequel to this departure revealed the depth of infantile debate over the conduct of the war, at least amongst armchair generals. Suddenly, Sangin became the place where US marines were going to show ‘the Brits’ how it should be done. To be fair, this bravado was not coming from the unfortunate unit posted to Sangin – 3/7 Marines – whose motto was ‘Get Some’. The young American marines soon did get some. Fortunately short-toured, this unit then handed over to 3/5 Marines ‘Darkhorse’. By January, the replacement unit had suffered as many fatalities as the Rifles in their entire tour. Over a hundred had been wounded, a tally that included triple amputees. More than a thousand IEDs were encountered. This was both a predictable and avoidable misfortune. 3/5 Marines was new to Afghanistan and had been pitched in the worst place. The precipitate withdrawal from the old British bases had fired up the insurgents who were now lapping against the breakwaters of FOB Jackson. The tactic of closing bases was duly reversed with levels of violence the British would have never dared employ. To re-invest the abandoned FOB Wishtan, every compound 100 metres either side of Pharmacy Road was flattened. Sangin was being destroyed in order to save it. Counter-claims of how many Taliban were being killed were meaningless. When most of the Upper Sangin Valley was in open insurrection against you, proffering exaggerated body counts was as futile as the body counts of the Vietnam War.

Quitting Sangin meant that Brigadier Felton could concentrate on what had become the main British effort: Nad-e Ali and Babaji Districts. Deployed in this area were three infantry battalions and two cavalry regiments, as well as additional sub-units drawn from

the Scots Guards and Royal Scots Borderers (1 Scots) mainly tasked with mentoring the ANA and ANP.

The Royal Dragoon Guards (RDG) commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Carr-Smith split into three squadron groups: B Squadron mounted in Mastiffs acted in support of the Gurkhas in Babaji and 1 Duke of Lancaster's Regiment (1 Lancs) in Nad-e Ali; C Squadron re-roled as infantry (a measure which the British Army had not entertained since the Second World War, such were the continuing problems with infantry numbers); and D Squadron took over the role of the armoured support group mounted in Vikings.

The Queen's Royal Lancers (QRL) assumed the role of the Brigade Reconnaissance Force which deployed as far away as Kandahar. A typical task given to this unit was Operation Zamaray Chasm ('Lion's Gap'), an operation to clear a suspected Taliban firing point in a compound. The number of troops required to undertake the simple act of clearing one compound had become very burdensome such was the threat of IEDs and ambushes. C Company 1 Lancs and an RDG squadron were used to isolate the village while Fondouk Squadron QRL moved in from the west. The operation unfolded in a frustrating and inconclusive fashion. The compound had been used as an insurgent firing point but the owner swore that the Taliban were forcing him to allow them this vantage point. There was nothing the soldiers could do except retire. As one of the Scimitars negotiated the muddy fields it threw a track. Locals observing the recovery operation decided to harass the crew with sporadic fire. The lancers retaliated by jockeying their Scimitars towards the firers. It became a game, as Lieutenant Jonny Clayton recalled: 'We saw them lower their weapons and retreat into compounds using children as their shields'. Eventually the stricken vehicle was recovered and nobody had been hit on either side, despite the volume of fire exchanged across the open fields. Within the week, insurgents would be back in the same compound taking pot shots at the British. In a war without frontlines, this was just one of many futile spats.

The centre of the reduced British area of responsibility was entrusted to 1 Lancs, a unit recently formed from the amalgamation of the King's Regiment and the Queen's Lancashire Regiment. Later in the tour, Arnhem and Blenheim Companies from 2 Lancs would be deployed to Helmand, marking the first occasion when both the new battalions were committed to operations. Lieutenant Colonel Frazer Lawrence, based at FOB Shawqat, inherited a more pacified Nad-e Ali from the Grenadier Guards. His main task now was to consolidate the gains and to keep pushing the Taliban into outlying areas and away from the villages. By the time the Lancasters quit Nad-e Ali the commanding officer

would dare venture into the bazaar in a beret rather than helmet.

The first of the major clearance operations, which took place at the beginning of June, was Operation Tor Makhe Zi ('Black Push Forward'). The aim of the operation was to extend the southern patrol line by another 1,000 metres south of the Kharotei Khowshal Kalay and Baluchi Gorup-e Shesh Kalay. Three patrol bases had already been established on an east-west line in the immediate vicinity of the villages. These bases – CPs Paraang, Haji Alem and Shamal Storrai - inevitably attracted insurgent fire. The villagers blamed the British for the fighting rather than the Taliban. It was imperative then to move the patrol line away from the villages and to establish a trip line further south.

The entire operation took place in a box three kilometres wide and two kilometres deep and took a week to complete. All the resources of the newly-formed Combined Force Nad-e Ali were required to counter insurgent gangs that probably numbered no more than two dozen fighters. Units supporting the Lancasters included the Royal Scots Borderers (1 Scots), the Royal Dragoon Guards, and the Queen's Royal Lancers. Construction teams from 21 Engineer Regiment stood by to build the new bases, and a counter-IED task force was collected to deal with the inevitable IED belts.

For the infantrymen, the operation began at 2am with preparations for an early morning infiltration. Unlike previous operations, typically initiated by heliborne assault, Operation Tor Makhe Zi literally involved marching a few hundred metres further down the track. With the loads the soldiers were carrying and the ever-present threat of IEDs, this short march took two and half gruelling hours. Some kingsmen were carrying in excess of 120 pounds of equipment. When the soldiers arrived at the designated locations for the new patrol bases they began to dig in. There was an unwelcome surprise, as one soldier recalled:

'Digging in was hard at first because the ground is baked, but once you got about a foot into it, it was a bit softer. But working in this heat with all the kit on is difficult. We had to swap every ten minutes to rotate through the jobs because it was so hard, really hot and sweaty.'[959]

The Brigade Reconnaissance Force mounted in Jackals had been used as a feint, but locals soon realised what was afoot and began to snipe at the Lancasters. As the temperature rose to 45 degrees, heads boiled under helmets and greasy hands slipped on rifle stocks. In truth, the gunmen had no hope of pushing back the British. With a pair of Apache circling overhead they had to exercise great caution in their movements but still

presented a real danger to the engineer work parties that exposed themselves in a race to build the new bases. Behind them, the counter-IED task force cleared 2,500 metres of track and discovered six IEDs. Working through the night, the three new patrol bases were duly completed and occupied. There were no British casualties, a measure perhaps of how weakened the insurgency had become in Nad-e Ali.

The precision of pre-planned operations such as Operation Tor Makhe Zi contrasted sharply with the weekly administration of moving sub-units between locations and ensuring their resupply. This was actually the main business of any battlegroup tasked with holding a matrix of patrol bases and it amounted to a sort of organised chaos which the soldiers bore with stoicism and humour. When 1 Platoon, A Company, 1 Lancs was told that it was being sent to CP Folad near Shaheed to relieve the Royal Welsh, it responded to the news enthusiastically. Shaheed had a reputation for regular gun fights with the Taliban (the platoon commander was caught in four such encounters soon after arriving ahead of his platoon). On completion of the reconnaissance of the new base, a transport helicopter managed to disembark a further six soldiers but then the handover plan began to unravel. The events that followed were probably embellished by the kingsman blogger, but perhaps not that much:

‘Days passed, smoke was thrown on the HLS at passing helicopters, but still no 1 Pl. Just when we thought all hope was lost another six men arrived and the entire Royal Welsh Pl disappeared. Where were the rest of the Pl? Harvey and Baines quickly found themselves in contact on the Sanger within two hours of their arrival. Eventually the rest of the Pl arrived cursing Shawqat, the Navy, the RAF and anyone else who caused the delay on there [sic] arrival to the PB. The RAF set about trying to destroy all our communications with Coy HQ. The plan was to refill the radios by helicopter then filling them [sic]. A helicopter arrived, and the man on the back purged our radios then flew away. Another helicopter arrived and an Engineer got off, much to our surprise. The man on the back of the helicopter then took the radios again and took them to Bastion leaving us with no comms. The next day he returned with the radios but they still were not filled. Kgn Cooper then got excited when he saw an Apache flying overhead and popped smoke anticipating that it would land and sort all our problems. Eventually the radios were fixed, however this was not to be the end of our dramas with the RAF. The very next day saw the R&R [Rest and Recuperation] plot kicking in and Cpl Walsh and Bdr Todd were to be extracted by helicopter. The helicopter arrived, the Engineer jumped off again much to our surprise, then took off leaving a stunned Cpl Walsh ready to cry in the middle of the HLS

… thereby missing his cousins [sic] wedding.’[960]

The consolation for the kingsmen was that they did find the action they craved - apart from 3 Section that somehow kept missing the insurgents, resulting in merciless teasing from the other two sections.

Shaheed was a well-known trouble spot. Other areas had not so much become benign as passive to the presence of the kingsmen. Showal had once been the strongest Taliban enclave in the Chah-e Anjir Triangle. Now soldiers based at PB Khamaar found that on an average day the worst they had to face was importunate children. As one soldier recorded:

‘The children up here are friendlier (Kgn Holding hasn’t had a stone thrown at him yet) but still insist on us giving them pens and chocolate on every patrol. Our attempts at cooling down by patrolling through the rivers in full kit certainly amuse them and a patrol passing through the bazaar normally leads to curious watching rather than suspicious staring as we had before.’[961]

Over time the kingsmen settled down in their new area, ‘smoking terrible Afghan cigarettes’, having ‘a good laugh around the camp fire’, and retelling war stories about scrapes elsewhere in Nad-e Ali. By August, the triangle of northern Nad-e Ali was being patrolled by 700 ISAF soldiers including a company from 1 Lancs, 2 Lancs and the Estonian Rifle Company Group 10. The ANA, always struggling to match promised troop numbers, were providing about 300 soldiers. Although the Lancasters had managed to control the immediate vicinity of their patrol bases, the remainder of the Chah-e Anjir Triangle continued to be dominated by the Taliban. It would fall to 3 Para, in the subsequent tour, to clear these remaining insurgent safe havens.

The last major operation undertaken by the Lancasters was Operation Tor Shezada. The south western corner of Nad-e Ali was a predominantly Hazara enclave centred on the village of Sayedabad. This shi’ite community was at the bottom of the pile within the tribal hierarchy, and the Taliban ruled the town in a bullying fashion. Clearing the Taliban from Sayedabad would remove the last significant insurgent presence in the district and hopefully win an ally for the British. The operation was mounted in mid-August, at the height of the summer heat, and there was virtually no resistance. Operation Tor Shezada had been preceded by Operation Tor Makhe Zi which pushed the patrol base line south of Khushal, Gorup e Shash and Noor Mohammed Khan villages. An estimated sixty to ninety insurgents were camped in the Sayedabad area. As a result of a successful deception plan

coordinated with 3/6 Marines, the insurgents seemed to believe that the main thrust would be from the south. This belief was reinforced when poor weather delayed the heliborne assault from the north by two days. When the eight helicopters carrying Somme Company swooped in there was total surprise. In the words of the Lancaster's Operations Officer, there was 'a virtual collapse of their [insurgents'] defensive network'.[962] Quick to exploit this success, Anzio and Corunna Companies swiftly cleared the two key routes leading to the village. It also appears that by advertising the operation in advance the insurgents were given the option to leave the area, an option which some took, dispersing east into Nawa. 'Kojak', the local Taliban commander, it appears retired to Lashkar Gah. The oppressed Hazaras were, as expected, grateful that the Taliban had been sent packing but also fearful of the consequences of their return. Clearing the area of IEDs proved a less difficult task compared to previous operations. The villagers obligingly told the British exactly where they were buried. As with so many previous operations, Tor Shezada proved not to be decisive. In October 2011, A Company, 1 Royal Irish would mount Tor Kanjak IV, followed by Operations Tor Zhemay II and III before finally securing the area. These lasted two months and resulted in 131 gun fights, twenty-five attacks against patrol bases, and twenty-five IED incidents.[963]

In neighbouring Babaji there were equally contrasting fortunes. This district had been split between the Gurkhas and 1 Mercians (Cheshires), commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Hadfield. For B (Malta) Company of the Mercians, the deployment to CP Kings Hill proved hellish (the base hung a sign over the entrance that read 'Welcome to Hell'). Kings Hill was built within the territory of probably the most resourceful insurgent gang in Babaji, and one almost certainly abetted by foreign fighters. The ground favoured the insurgents with numerous hedges and orchards that allowed a covert approach to the base. Kings Hill was soon ringed by IEDs as one soldier warned a visiting reporter from *The Sun*:

'Walk out there on your own and you would be dead in seconds. That field is full of IEDs (improvised explosive devices) and the ditches around it are even worse.'[964]

He was not greatly exaggerating. The frontline extended to a radius of just a few hundred metres and the soldiers were completely hemmed in by constant sniping. Malta Company, led by Major Richard Grover, seemed destined to experience bad luck. The simple task of chopping down a tree in front of a sangar left one soldier dead and four others injured as the Taliban had succeeded in planting IEDs right under the shadow of the patrol base walls. A patrol venturing outside unknowingly passed over an IED and almost

escaped unharmed but the ninth man finally applied the necessary pressure to detonate the device and lost a leg. Another IED strike resulted in a triple amputation. Patrols got shot at with accurate fire. On one patrol, two soldiers, Corporal Terry Webster and Lance Corporal Alan Cochran, were both shot dead. Other fatalities included Lieutenant John Sanderson, a 'big man with a heart of gold', who was killed in an IED strike, and Lance Corporal Andrew Breeze, also killed by an IED. Remarkably, Breeze, a 31 year old from Manchester, was on his *sixth* operational tour. These were shocking experiences to the young soldiers. Grover was contemptuous of this 'coward's way to fight a war' but it was also an effective way to fight. Over five weeks the company suffered nine fatalities and twelve soldiers seriously injured. An entire platoon had been effectively wiped out by these invisible killers.

Another particularly bad area was the 'Babaji Pear', in the south-west corner of the district, which had mostly been avoided by ISAF. This fell to Left Flank Company Scots Guards, and their tour proved hectic. Between 22 April and 1 October not one day passed when the guardsmen were not involved in a gun fight. Eventually there were a total of 650 such spats and the soldiers fired off more than 350,000 rounds. Over the course of the summer there were seventy-eight incidents involving IEDs, and three IED factories were discovered. Some 150 insurgents were reckoned to have been killed. It was a tribute to the soldiers that despite the heavy levels of fighting, just three guardsmen were killed and twenty injured. IED detection skills also improved: for every one that detonated, nine were being found.[965]

The Gurkhas, who concentrated their campaign on securing the Barakzai villages of Rahim Kalay and Paind Kalay, got off much more lightly.[966] Aside from the incident on 13 July in which the rogue ANA soldier killed three soldiers before fleeing PB 3, the battalion suffered no fatalities over several weeks. This was not due to a lack of insurgent activity, especially at PBs 1 and 4. Over the summer months, the Gurkhas found that every third patrol was engaged in gun battles, and immediately following the poppy harvest virtually every patrol entering a new area came under fire from the local Barakzai. Luck may have played a part, but the Gurkhas also made their own luck. As one rifleman recalled, the company knew that it had won over the trust of the locals when they started selling chickens to the soldiers at local prices. Another surprising measure of the build-up of trust was the arrival of two unaccompanied women at PBs 2 and 4, to attend compensation clinics. This was unheard of in Helmand. One of the women had been widowed in the previous summer during Operation Panchai Palang. It had taken her a year

to find the courage and confidence to approach the British in person, without a male escort, to seek compensation. Later in the war, the British would be approached by Afghan women seeking protection from violent relatives. These remarkable if rare episodes revealed that Afghan women, far from being ignorant and illiterate chattel, had a very shrewd idea of where they might find justice. It was not in the medieval sharia law foisted on them by village mullahs but in the fairness displayed by Western soldiers whose language they did not even speak. These incidents spoke eloquently of the tragedy suffered by Afghanistan's perennial victims of war – its womenfolk.

Raw courage also played a part in the Gurkhas' war, as it had done in past tours. Acting Sergeant Dipprasid Pun was acting as night sentry at a patrol base near Rahim Kalay when he became aware of a digging noise outside the front gate.[967] On investigating, to his amazement, he found a group of insurgents digging in an IED under the very noses of the British. In the ensuing gun battle Pun single-handedly fought off the insurgent gang, killing three, at one stage hurling a machine gun tripod at an assailant who had climbed the base perimeter wall, when he ran out of ammunition. Over the course of this desperate action Pun fired off all his magazines, a belt of machine gun ammunition, and threw seventeen grenades to keep the attackers at bay. The assault was only finally broken off when Pun detonated a Claymore mine. For this action, Dipprasid Pun, whose grandfather and father both held gallantry awards, was awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Cross.

The luck would run out right at the end of the tour when a suicide bomber killed Rifleman Suraj Gurung, a recently married soldier from Gorkha in the foothills of the Himalayas. Reflecting the frustrating unpredictability of insurgent tactics, the suicide bomber had been squatting beside a stream washing his feet. As the patrol approached he stood up to hail the approaching Gurkhas before detonating his bomb. No training could prepare the soldiers for this kind of behaviour. Body parts of the bomber were later found 100 metres from the detonation point.

Lieutenant Colonel Gerald Strickland saw the problem in Babaji as one of a lack of governance and set about addressing this vacuum in authority with determination. By the end of the tour the Gurkhas would be visited by General Petraeus, keen to see the results of this experiment in fostering local representation. At the heart of the protected communities in Babaji were Village Development Councils, described by Major Jones who commanded C Company at PB 2, in this manner:

'The Village Development Council (VDC) has also come on in leaps and bounds during the last few weeks. Having lacked any real governance at local level, the VDC

aims to bridge the gap between the rural areas such as Paind Kalay and the District Government machinery in Gereshk and Lashkar Gah. Drawing nominated elders from across the area, it aims to create a forum in which local issues can be discussed and decided upon. The VDC will also be a means through which development agencies and GIRoA (the Afghan government) can channel and direct their efforts. Although for us, this may sound like a simple town council meeting, it is notoriously hard to establish something like this in Helmand where suspicions, self motivation and self interest dominate nearly every agenda. That we have managed to get some of the people to sit in the same room together, given years of family feuds and tribal rivalries, has been an accomplishment all of its own. The fact that they now seem happy to work together in the interests of the community, also in many ways seems too good to be true, but they are doing it and their approach is really encouraging.'[968]

The VDCs were yet one more initiative in a long line of initiatives, but were they sustainable? A village like Paind Kalay had gone over to the government side because the British were acting as honest brokers and pumping money into small, local projects. Jones was trusted in a way that no corrupt official from Gereshk or Lashkar Gah was ever going to be trusted. What would happen when the British handed over Paind Kalay to an ANA company, or worse, a police detachment? Would the fledgling VDCs still exist in four years' time when the British had quit Helmand?

The diminishing area of British responsibility in Helmand was reflected in the realities of life on the front line. In 2008 a British patrol may have spent a day outside a patrol base roaming over several kilometres. By the summer of 2010 the average patrol length had reduced to just ninety minutes and patrols were only straying a few hundred metres from their patrol bases, taking care to remain within the weapon ranges of the sangars. The British were literally holding fortified Alamos, to use Michael Yon's phrase (over ninety now across Task Force Helmand), and nothing else. The clear-hold-build strategy was remorselessly being reduced to a costly strategy of mostly holding existing bases. Twenty-four of the brigade's twenty-six available companies were in the 'ground-holding role' - that is, fixed in a patrol base or FOB. The number of bases manned by British soldiers (in partnership with the ANA or ANP) jumped from 53 to 119 – the biggest single expansion of any British brigade. These bases continued to attract violence. In 2009 there had been an average of around 300 TiCs (Troops in Contact) per month. In the summer of 2010, this number had risen to 400, and there had been a 200 per cent increase in the number of IEDs. 'Fighting the FOB' – as it became known – was the logical and inevitable

consequence of a process started by 12 Mechanised Brigade in the summer of 2007 when it steamed over the Green Zone, leaving behind patrol bases in its wash. Every succeeding brigade had added to the matrix of patrol bases. And every single new base – without exception – became another platoon house under siege.

The answer to this dilemma for the British was to procure American technology, rather than a revision of tactics. Patrol bases became highly sophisticated organisms with acutely sensitive sensors and powerful defensive stings – indeed these were probably the most expensive patrol bases in the history of modern warfare. Mast mounted cameras – an American system called Cortez - began to appear on the skylines of patrol bases. A surveillance balloon called Revivor, first used in Iraq, duly made its appearance in Afghanistan. These were later augmented by larger aerostats – the Permanent Ground Surveillance System (PGSS) - manned by American contractors. The American acoustic system Boomerang, designed to detect the location of small arms firing points, was erected on base roofs. The American Lightweight Counter-Mortar Radar (LCMR) was deployed to larger bases to detect insurgent mortar firing points. Lightweight Electronic Warfare Teams (LEWTs) used a variety of commercial direction finders to try to pinpoint Taliban communications (always a difficult task in the Green Zone). Interpreters using ICOM scanners monitored Taliban conversations in case they needed to warn a patrol outside the base of an impending attack. Sentries in sangars scanned and gave cover to patrols using grenade machine guns and the trusty .50 Cal Browning machine gun. Mortar men prepared their pits and gunners readied the Desert Hawk III mini-UAV used to watch over the patrol while it was out on the ground. If the patrol was part of a larger co-ordinated operation involving several patrol bases, a Hermes 450 UAV, Apache or fighter aircraft could be added to the shopping list of sensors.

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The cost of all this technology was phenomenal. It was unsurprising that the first announcement of additional expenditure from Treasury Reserves made by the Conservative-Liberal government - after pledging to increase counter-IED resources - was for £189 million, the majority used to procure additional surveillance equipment. It was also notable that Britain’s down-sized army was mirrored by an eviscerated British defence industry which could no longer respond quickly or at all to the operational requirements of the army. When Britain went to war over the Falkland Islands in 1982, virtually all the equipment fielded by the army was British manufactured (although its steaks came from Argentina, a situation that was quickly rectified by finding an alternative

supplier). One generation later virtually all new equipment was foreign made. This was a dramatic historic reversal of the British experience of warfare. The colours of disbanded regiments hanging in corners of Britain's cathedrals principally told the story of the nation's defence of commerce. Except when Britain found herself dragged into European wars to maintain the balance of power, or to fight tyrants, Britain went to war to protect her commercial interests. A 19th century Briton would not have understood the rationale for going to war otherwise – the whole business was expensive, bloody, and uncertain. Now Britain was going to war to create business for others. Dead British soldiers were making foreigners wealthy.

An inventory of new equipment the Labour government was forced to procure to support the armed forces as Urgent Operational Requirements (UORs), as well as other programs that contributed key equipment to the wars, illustrates how America, principally, became Britain's armourer. Britain could no longer fight its wars without massive foreign assistance.

The list included: the C-17 transport aircraft (American); Shadow R1 surveillance aircraft (American); WAH-64D Apache (American); Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System (American); Desert Hawk UAV (American); Predator B UAV (American); Scan Eagle UAV (American); Tarantula UAV (American); Sniper pods for Harrier GR.7 (American); Lightweight Counter-Mortar Radar-LCRM (American); Counter Rocket-Artillery-Mortar C-RAM system (American); Boomerang shot detection system (American); Javelin anti-tank missile (American); the M203 underslung grenade launcher (American); the 66mm LASM rocket (American); Sharpshooter rifle (American); Barrett 0.5 calibre sniper rifle (American); the widely used ACOG rifle sight (American); the VIPR 2 thermal imaging sight (American); the Head Mounted Night Vision Device (American); Mastiff (American); Ridgback (American); Wolfhound (American); Husky (American); a new wheeled tanker (American); Talisman counter-IED system (American); Persistent Theatre Detection System - PTDS (American); Persistent Ground Detection System - PTDS (American); Revivor balloons (American); Cortez surveillance system (American); Firestorm Target Acquisition System (American); HEATs and GRATs situational awareness systems (American); Rover III terminals to receive UAV footage (American); JADOCs command system (American); PSS-OFF mensuration system for precision attack (American); TIGR patrol data logging system (American); HIIDEs biometric collection system (American); Combat Identification Marking Systems (American); Bowman Radio (Canadian-American); Sentinel R1 surveillance aircraft

(Canadian-American); 0.5 Cal Browning (American-Belgian); Litening II and III pods for Tornado GR.4 (Israeli); Hermes 450 UAV (Israeli); vehicle up-armour packs (Israeli); Spike-NLOS, also known as Exactor (Israeli); the Automatic Grenade Launcher (German); the Vallon mine detector (German); the Laser Light Module Mk 3 (German); a new range of MAN trucks (German); the 5.56mm Minimi (Belgian); Black Hornet UAV (Norwegian): the combat shot gun (Italian); Next Generation Light Anti-Tank Weapon (Swedish); Mamba radar (Swedish); Giraffe radar (Swedish); BvS10 Viking (Swedish); Anti-Structure Munition (Swedish-German); Panther (Italian); Trakker trucks (Italian); Vector PPV (Austrian); the 60mm mortar (Austrian); the Commanders' Target Location System PLRF 10/15 (Swiss); Warthog (Singaporean); Battlegroup Thermal Imaging (French); the Joint Target Acquisition System (French), the Surveillance System and Range Finder – SSARF (French); Sophie smart binoculars (French); the SLD-500 sniper detection system (French); the Seer electronic warfare system (predominantly French and Italian technology); and quad bikes (Japanese).

The list is not exhaustive and the national branding does simplify the multi-national nature of the defence industry, but the absence of the word 'British' is obvious. British defence industry could no longer design or manufacture the most basic tool of a soldier – his rifle. The standard service rifle (SA-80) was rescued from its many problems by a German company (Heckler & Koch). This was unsurprising as both the historic Royal Small Arms Factory at Enfield Lock, and Royal Ordnance, no longer existed. The many modifications added to the weapon in Afghanistan were all foreign: the Lightweight Day Sight (American), ACOG sight (American), Picatinny Rail (American). Laser Light Module (German); Underslung Grenade Launcher (American); and new magazines (American). Even the thousands of foot-slogging kilometres trodden by British infantrymen were creating wealth abroad. The first of the new issue army desert boot was manufactured in Spain. The Meindl boot that was worn in Helmand was creating jobs in a small village called Kirchanschöring, in Bavaria. The British dead and wounded who could not walk were carted off on an American stretcher – the Tallon II. Whether politicians cared to admit it, the dolorous repatriation ceremony at Wootton Bassett was a cash cow for foreign firms.

The point about 'fighting the FOB' was that it was not taking the fight to the enemy – it was mostly just making it much harder for locals to attack the British. This did not imply a tactical victory for the insurgency. From the Taliban perspective, this defensive strategy created significant and even insurmountable problems. Each patrol base line was pushing them further and further away from the population centres. Brendan Hughes, a former

Belfast Brigade IRA commander, once confessed that the British Army's surveillance apparatus in Ulster effectively ground his operations to a halt. The same phenomenon was beginning to be witnessed in Helmand. Paradoxically, the British were now winning the match by batting defensively.

These developments emerged against the background of the ninth major, international conference held on Afghanistan since the beginning of the war. The 20 July Kabul Conference was significant for several reasons. It was the first such conference held in Afghanistan, despite the security headache incurred by the arrival of over sixty foreign delegations. Media leaks had already revealed that a timetable for ISAF's withdrawal by 2014-15 was the implicit agenda of the conference. On the Sunday preceding the conference this position was candidly stated by Liam Fox in a political chat show program.[969] To improve the chances of a successful withdrawal the government made the tactical announcement that British aid to Afghanistan would be increased by 40 per cent, an echo of the Soviet politburo's last fling of the dice before withdrawing from Afghanistan in the 1980s. This increase in foreign aid was questioned by a leading charity that pointed out that around $40 billion had been reportedly committed to Afghanistan since 2001 and much of this aid had been largely wasted.[970] The conference passed off peacefully, and all the delegations, save the Iranian representative who jarringly criticized the presence of Western soldiers in Afghanistan, repeated the same tired messages: an end to corruption, the 'Afghanization' of the war, and reconstruction. The conference pointedly had little to say about reconciliation or a political solution to the conflict. Hillary Clinton soberly left the conference remarking that success was far from guaranteed.

This show of unity was barely a week old before a massive leak of military secrets detonated in Washington provoking anger and embarrassment. The source of the leaks appeared to be a baby-faced American soldier working in an intelligence post in Baghdad. Private Bradley Manning – writing under the pseudonym 'Bradass87' – astonishingly appeared to have passed around 90,000 CENTCOM SIGACTs (Significant Actions) and other reports dating from 2004-2009 to the popular website Wikileaks, run by the Australian Julian Assange. Manning's motivation seemed unclear. It was apparent that he was a troubled young man whose suitability for intelligence work was open to question. He was an only child from a broken home. He had been rejected by his father (for his homosexuality), and neglected by his Welsh mother who returned to her native Wales. Manning drifted for awhile, falling in love with a transvestite and living in a trailer park, before finally finding a home in the US Army. He struggled to make friendships and

remained the slighted and slightly clever loner. Manning also seemed to have suffered from an inflated sense of self-importance, a periodic malady in intelligence staff, and felt the need to show off the span of his knowledge to a stranger (in this case a hacker who immediately informed the authorities). If he thought he was going to get away with such a gross act of disclosure he was naïve. It took just two days to track him down. SIGACTs were routine secret level synopses of incidents as well as reports on other matters of general intelligence interest. The complete ISAF IED database and a database of over 2,000 potential targets for special force operations were also passed.

For maximum impact Julian Assange co-ordinated the revelation of the reports with three international newspapers: *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *Der Spiegel*. There was little in this treasure trove of reports that was especially revelatory of the war in Afghanistan but the media milked the story without restraint. Predator missions in Pakistan were well reported on the internet, including the high number of civilian casualties that these strikes incurred. The wider loss of civilian life was also reported openly by ISAF - as accurately as it could manage in often confusing circumstances - and compensation was paid in verified cases. The growth and number of IEDs was published annually in colourful presentations. Fratricidal incidents were not a secret. Neither was the waywardness of the Afghan police nor the difficulty of distinguishing suicide bombers from innocent drivers. Pakistani covert support for the Taliban was barely a surprise, but rather an open secret. Special force operations that resulted in the killing of innocent Afghans were also openly reported (indeed, with typical American honesty, these bungled raids were tabulated in official magazines such as *Armed Forces Journal*, a candour that would not be found in the *British Army Review* that by this stage in the war was being censored). Anyone seeking some fresh and dramatic insight into the conduct of the war would have been disappointed.

What the endless roll of reports starkly revealed, in that neutral voice leaden with acronyms so characteristic of military reporting, was the omnipresence of a factor that nobody embarking on conflict can control – the friction of war. A picture emerged of soldiers caught in a confusing and relentless escalator of violence. The principal message broadcast by this great volume of reporting was that war zones are hazardous places, again, hardly a great revelation. The implicit accusation that ISAF was hiding the true extent of the war was unfair. ISAF had no remit (or ability) to provide the media with a day-to-day account of the hundreds of violent incidents that took place throughout Afghanistan. Just managing ISAF reporting chains required intelligence battalions. Establishing the truth in the overwhelming majority of incidents – to a standard that would

be acceptable against a legal bar, for instance – was quite beyond the resources of anybody. Major incidents were investigated and frankly reported. Scores of minor incidents could not realistically be afforded the same investigatory effort.

Another salient point that emerged from the leak was the consistently exaggerated BDA (Battle Damage Assessment) – or enemy kill count. If CENTCOM was to be believed, ISAF had killed 10,000s of insurgents over the five year period, which it had not. The universal exaggeration by soldiers of their ability to kill the enemy was stamped all over these reports. Perhaps the real significance of the leak was that it had happened at all. The last time the US military suffered a politically damaging leak was in 1971 during the Vietnam War. The augury could not have been worse.

The Afghan war logs leak again served to highlight the confrontational relation between the media and the military in Western democracies. Since the Vietnam War, Western military forces, and especially the American armed forces, had become typecast as clumsy villains by certain sections of the media. This commonly implied that Western media organs effectively championed vile, ignorant enemies of the very values that liberal opinion cherished. Wikileak's raison d'être was to challenge 'unethical behaviour' in governments. Such behaviour was not short in Taliban Afghanistan, or elsewhere in the Third World for that matter. It was also noteworthy that the founder of Wikileaks promoted the war logs on the grounds that they contained possible evidence of war crimes. The war logs were sodden with the crimes committed by the Taliban. These seemed to be of little interest to the Western media. *The Guardian*, which devoted numerous in-depth articles to specific themes emerging from the war logs, did not write a feature on the wickedness of the Taliban, or the sad litany of murder, intimidation and bombings carried out by violent extremists in Afghanistan.

The tendency to give this enemy the benefit of the doubt was sometimes arresting. Quoting an incident in which American forces targeted two Taliban leaders and claimed to have killed a large number of insurgents, *The Guardian* commented, that, 'in fact', as many as 300 civilians may have been killed.[971] What actually happened on Operation Jang Baz on 2 August 2007 would never be determined with accuracy. There was sufficient evidence in the reporting to indicate that the official version of events was substantially correct. Two senior Taliban leaders had been successfully tracked along with a large number of followers. No women were reported amongst the victims, which was generally a good indicator that a valid target had been struck. The military reporting erred on two main points: it subsequently transpired that one of the targets was probably missed,

a possibility which was conceded in these events. And the kill count became exaggerated the further it travelled down the reporting line from 25-50 Taliban, to 150 Taliban by the time Lieutenant General John Mulholland was boasting about the strike. It was also true – as anyone with experience of Afghanistan could verify – that amongst the dead would have been bystanders and hangers-on. In this case it appeared that the Taliban had actually been rounding up locals to watch an execution, a fact that could not have been determined by UAV operators acting as the eyes for the operation. The ISAF report did not dwell on the possibility of civilian casualties, but *The Guardian* committed the equivalent foul of reporting local claims. In effect, *The Guardian* acted as a mouthpiece for Taliban propaganda, because that is what the figure of 300 civilian casualties was. The more modest figure of eighteen wounded civilians treated at Lashkar Gah hospital was hidden at the bottom of the page. It took some leap for an educated, cultured and deeply fortunate European to become a rebroadcast transmitter for the propaganda of an obscurantist, misogynistic movement, but this was the position that some journalism took in the war.

'Afghan figures', as British soldiers called them, were a standing joke. Nobody with a sense of reporting integrity ever accepted Afghan casualty claims because they were invariably and grossly exaggerated (much like ISAF kill counts to be fair). The follow-up to these events was also revelatory of a great gap in the reporting integrity of ISAF and the media machine, with the former clearly coming out on top. ISAF was meticulous in investigating mass casualty incidents, if for no other reason than it was clearly in ISAF's interest to determine the truth and to compensate victims where innocent people had been killed. The media never displayed such integrity or close interest in what happened. Sensational headlines and quotes of the largest uncorroborated casualty figure became clichés of Western reporting. It would have been very difficult for Western journalists to investigate any of these incidents because of the risk to life, but it was the manner in which ISAF was consistently portrayed as being involved in sinister cover-ups, and the way in which the most exaggerated, local version of events was given uncritical prominence, that seemed to signal both journalistic laziness and a dysfunctional relation between the media and soldiers. A plague on both your houses was hardly the way forward. Both parties needed to reflect.

The role of Julian Assange, who would later release thousands of US State Department cables, grew increasingly controversial. To his supporters, Assange was the champion of a universal human right to know what governments are doing on behalf of the governed. There is no such human right. These supporters included minor celebrities as well as a small army of childish 'hacktivists'. To detractors, Assange was an odd egomaniac with a weird

world view. Certainly his personal life seemed to raise questions. Apparently rootless and wanted for rape allegations in Sweden, Assange was not an obviously attractive character. The manner in which he self-consciously posed for reporters in a range of different coats made him curiously resemble a Bond villain, which he might well have been if Ian Fleming had still been alive and writing.

These were trivial observations ranged against the more serious concerns with Assange's entire project. From the start, the anti-Americanism was blatant. This was a strange choice of target; the federal government of the United States was the most open and most generous with official information in the world. For students, researchers, journalists, historians or merely curious browsers, the United States was a model of openness and accountability in a league quite of its own (in contrast, it might be observed, to the British government, which is rather less forthcoming in accounting its decisions honestly to its citizens). The list of governments whose machinations deserved to be exposed to the world was exceedingly long, but the United States government was nowhere near the top of the list. What principally emerged from the publication of thousands of diplomatic cables was a picture of American diplomacy as measured and reasonable. If the intention was to reveal skulduggery, then the project failed. Like the earlier release of American military secrets, the fact was that neither represented a Pandora's Box of horrors. In contrast with US government openness, Assange's hermetic attitude towards his own affairs seemed deeply hypocritical. Disclosure seemed to be good for everyone, apart from him. The most basic objection to Assange, however, was the puerile proposition that confidentiality has no place in adult discourse. A world without walls is not a better world. It is an inconceivable world that has never existed, nor will exist.

The Wikileaks story was soon pushed off the front pages by the continuing problem of corruption at the heart of Afghanistan's government. In early September it emerged that Kabul Bank was close to insolvency. This bank had been established in 2004. Perhaps $1.2 billion had been deposited in the bank since its formation.[972] A proportion of these funds were derived from the narcotics trade and some accounts were almost certainly stuffed with embezzled aid money. The bank mattered because it accounted for about half of the banking sector in Afghanistan and it was responsible for the payroll of Afghanistan's civil servants and security forces (a contract which it won, according to opponents, because it had funded President Karzai's election campaign). Karzai's brother, Mahmood, was a shareholder and he had been using the bank to fund personal business

interests. The Vice-President's brother, Haseem Fahim, had been repeating the trick. In fact, it transpired that a small clique in Kabul had effectively been using the bank as a personal bank account, granting themselves credits to fund luxury lifestyles, with no intention of repaying the loans.

The scale of the fraud cast Western donors in a scandalous and irresponsible light. A subsequent study noted 'the bank's structure was created with the prime purpose of committing fraud on a massive scale'.[973] Around 114 fictitious companies and 2,000 false loan accounts were created, which no Western donor or auditing firm appeared to notice, siphoning off an estimated $861 million, or 92 per cent of the bank's loan book into the pockets of just twelve individuals – the blessed Apostles of Western naïveté.[974] This represented between 6-10 per cent of Afghanistan's GDP.[975] There had probably never been such an outright theft of national wealth by so few individuals in modern history. The chairman of the bank, Sherkhan Farnood, bought sixteen properties in Abu Dhabi's Palm Jumeirah complex. In total, perhaps some £93 million was invested in properties by the bank's executives in this luxury resort, and in Kabul. £37 million vanished in first class flights and five star hotels – a boon to these industries but hardly the purpose of British aid. On one occasion, an Afghan minister arrived in Abu Dhabi with $52 million stuffed in suitcases. Afghan affluence was so brazen locals jokingly nicknamed the cluster of new properties Kabul Bank Street. Another standing joke was Afghan officials turning up at Bagram Airport, under ISAF protection, with suitcases filled with dollars.

News of the bank's insolvency spread causing panic amongst its two million depositors. Within days, $300 million had been withdrawn by account holders, forcing the bank to close its doors, which provoked civil disturbances. The US government refused to countenance a bail-out (especially after the Afghans refused to allow American auditors to inspect the books, an exercise that would have revealed the scale and depth of government corruption), and no other donor countries came forward to rescue the bank. The chairman Sherkhan Farnood and chief executive Khalilullah Fruzi were sacked by Karzai in a move to appease outraged Western opinion but the damage had been done. Both men would eventually be recalled and effectively be offered an amnesty, as their knowledge of government corruption was so extensive, Karzai could not afford to prosecute them. There were calls for the bank to go into receivership but the number of corrupt Afghan officials who would have lost money temporarily blocked this measure. Eventually the bank was forced into receivership in the spring of the following year. DfID suspended aid payments of £80 million but this was shutting the stable door after the horse had bolted. For several

years, DfID had been giving away millions of pounds of British taxpayers' money to fund the luxury lifestyles of corrupt Afghan officials (including a rather smart property in Belgravia, an unusual reinvestment of British aid), all the while lauding itself as an exemplar of smart aid policy. The embezzled funds would not be recovered and sacked officials would simply move on to graze in some other financial pasture.[976] By 2012, just five individuals had been taken into custody, but for a variety of technical and bureaucratic reasons, none had been taken to court.[977] The ex-Governor simply fled to the United States where he enjoyed legal residency and could not be pursued or prosecuted.

When the Public Accounts Committee sat to deliberate on DfiD's financial management in 2011, its findings were predictably severe.[978] The Department had stopped monitoring its own finance plan in 2010. It had no credible mechanism to estimate leakage through fraud and embezzlement. It was increasing its aid through multilaterals over which it had little or no visibility. Aid was being channelled through complex and costly delivery chains. Each hand through which the money passed naturally took a cut. In the Committee's view, DfID could neither demonstrate that it was achieving value for value, nor indeed whether it had a convincing way of measuring value for money. DfID responded to this inquiry with barely credible assertions prompting the Committee to conclude:

'We were unconvinced that figures of around 0.01% were an accurate reflection of the scale of fraud, and were concerned that no instances of fraud were identified in half of the countries to which the Department gave aid in 2010-11. In our view, current levels of reported fraud are unbelievably low.'

These findings were shocking as DfID was the single government department whose budget was being increased to meet an ideological target of 0.7 per cent of gross national income committed to aid by 2013. A department with a staff of just over 2,000 would be controlling a budget in the order of £11 billion. This was the biggest concentration of taxpayers' money in the hands of the smallest number of civil servants, of any government department, the Treasury aside. Their lack of transparency and honest reporting was hardly reassuring.

The real damage from DfID's denial was inflicted on the perceptions of ordinary Helmandis. As Michael Martin astutely pointed out, Helmandis were well aware of the scale of embezzlement and fraud of British aid funds – they were doing it.[979] That the PRT seemed to be turning a blind eye to this truth fostered a conspiracy theory that the

British were effectively laundering their own money and supporting the crooks at the top.

The financial woes of Kabul Bank were mere ripples on the surface of a very murky pool. In August, Fazel Ahmed Faqiryar, Afghanistan's deputy attorney general was sacked by Hamid Karzai. Faqiryar did not go quietly. In an interview with *The New York Times* he revealed that he had been blocked from prosecuting cases against corrupt officials. These included seventeen members of Karzai's government and five provincial governors. Another twenty-two cases had been suspended without explanation.[980] As Anthony Cordesman argued in the early autumn of 2010, there was a massive difference between habitual Afghan corruption and the extravagant orgy of corruption now blighting the country.[981] In Cordesman's damning verdict The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) had proved 'incompetent to the point of near total irresponsibility'.[982] USAID, the US State Department and other foreign donors were similarly lashed. From 2002 to 2010, according to the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), total aid to Afghanistan was estimated at $62.1 billion, of which $50.5 billion had been provided by the United States. Over half of these funds had been poured into poorly supervised defence contractors who themselves had sub-contracted to corrupt Afghan companies that lay in the hands of a small number of powerbrokers. In other words, corruption had spread like an infection enriched with the oxygen of US dollars. The massive scale of ISAF convoy operations had provoked a scale of bribery (at illegal and legal checkpoints) that far exceeded the size of this Afghan blight when the Taliban first erupted in Kandahar to put an end, precisely, to this problem. Over $4 billion had been spent by the United States alone on counter-narcotics programs and the illicit trade had boomed.

What this waterfall of Western money had created was manic levels of corruption and fraud by Afghans who had witnessed this all before with the Soviets, and who knew that the only sensible survival strategy was to grab fistfuls of dollars before the waterfall ran dry. Although Cordesman's vitriol was mostly directed at his own government's failings, it could equally have been directed at the British. Alone of all aid organisations, DfID had argued for pumping money through the Afghan government, and this indeed was where the overwhelming majority of British aid money had gone, or disappeared. Giving people money did not make them virtuous, as Cordesman argued, nor did it succeed in 'capacity building', the catch-all euphemism used to justify this largesse. It made them corrupt and drained institutions of credibility. The Afghan government did, of course, need to be strengthened, but recklessly and irresponsibly throwing money at it was not the way to go

about this vital task. No anti-corruption drive had ever succeeded in the developing world – why, Cordesman asked, would any such initiatives succeed in a country rated as the second most corrupt society in the world? ‘There is virtually zero probability,’ he asserted, ‘that classic anti-corruption efforts can have a major impact on Afghan corruption on any scale beyond scapegoating and tokenism before the war is lost or won’. Gloomily, his analysis concluded that nobody really knew how bad the situation was.

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On 19 September Afghans voted in the country’s second parliamentary elections (the Wolesi Jirga). Western fretting over the fairness of Afghan elections had given way to resignation. Somewhere between 10-20 per cent of Afghans bothered to vote. There were around 500 violent incidents related to the election which left fifteen people dead and more than forty injured. The Free and Fair Elections Foundation for Afghanistan (FEFA) recorded 4,000 complaints over voting irregularities. One of President Karzai’s cousins even found himself affected by the widespread fraud and had to muscle into a polling station with his bodyguards to stop opponents interfering with the vote.[983] In Sangin which the British quit after expending so much blood and treasure, 188 votes were cast in the District Centre from a voting population of 35,000. About 700 people voted in Nad-e Ali (from a population of over 100,000) but some of these were stuffed ballots, and 815 votes were counted in Gereshk. No voting figures were reported for Babaji, the district which Brigadier Radford had ‘liberated’ in the previous summer to allow its inhabitants to vote. In some districts, no women were allowed to vote, a measure enforced by the simple expedient of not providing female voting booths. The British ambassador did not bother to comment. At the national level, one quarter of the votes were invalidated, such was the level of fraud.[984] The biggest losers were the Pashtuns who shot themselves in the foot by failing to vote (in part due to Taliban intimidation). Pashtun representation in the Wolesi Jirga fell from 129 seats to around 90, weakening the already discredited Karzai. In Helmand the great winner was Sher Akhundzada who managed to place three of the eight MPs, including his former driver, now elevated from chauffeuring to collecting bribes for his master in the Wolesi Jirga. The truth was that the ineffectual Afghan parliament had become a grand court of corruption with brazen intermediaries of the various ministers openly loitering in corridors with envelopes stuffed with dollars, to hand out bribes to MPs. Millions of dollars exchanged hands in this way. As much of this money came from DfID, it gave a new meaning to the concept of ‘capacity building’.

The opium poppy harvest in 2010 provided little solace for ISAF. Forest fires in Russia

and devastating floods in Pakistan had not affected the price of wheat which remained low by historic level. The incentive for Afghan farmers to grow the illicit opium poppy remained as strong as in previous years. The total hectares devoted to this crop were unchanged although disease had resulted in a 48 per cent drop in opium production to 3,600 metric tons.[985] This benefited the farmers as the average farm gate price of dry opium leapt from $64 per kilogram to $169 per kilogram. The gross income per hectare of opium was calculated at $4,900 which amounted to a 39 per cent pay rise for Helmand's farmers, or substantially more than the pay rise a British soldier protecting the farmers could hope to receive. The total farm gate value of the crop for 2010 was estimated at $604 million (by contrast, British counter-narcotics spend in Helmand for that year was £6.2 million).[986] It was a bonanza for the narcotics traffickers. Helmand, as in previous years, was the champion opium province accounting for 53 per cent of the total crop. CENTCOM figures for drug busts revealed that the counter-narcotics campaign remained woefully inadequate. There had been twenty-four such operations over the summer in Helmand.[987] The average find was a couple of ten kilogram bags of wet opium. The largest was an operation that netted two metric tons of raw opium.

The battle for public perceptions was not going well either. A poll conducted by ICOS, albeit across a very small sample size, revealed that four years of ISAF operations in Helmand and Kandahar had done little to shift local opinion.[988] Just under half of Helmandis believed that the Taliban and not the government controlled their districts. In some areas like Marjah where the US marines were struggling to overcome deep prejudices, the figure was a staggering 89 per cent. Even in a district like Garmsir which both the British and Americans had advertised as a success story, the figure was still a disturbingly high 31 per cent. Around two thirds of the polled believed that Taliban recruitment had increased in the past year, adding evidence to the argument that the war only served to strengthen the Taliban. Three quarters believed that the Taliban and not the Afghan government would fill the vacuum caused by ISAF's eventual withdrawal (they were, of course, correct). This was a crucial point. Transition was predicated on the assumption that the 'clear' meant a permanent clearance of Taliban presence. As the incoming British brigade was about to discover, this assumption was weak.

The first Operation Herrick tour under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government concluded in mid-October. The brigade had endured thirty gunfights per day and over 5,000 over the course of the six month tour.[989] Including six Danes and one Estonian, Brigadier Felton had lost a total of sixty-two men. Over 400 had been wounded in action,

or a battalion's worth of soldiers.[990] The last to die was a kingsman serving with Arnhem Company 2 Lancs who stepped on an IED in Babaji District, on the eve of the handover to 16 Air Assault Brigade. The brigade claimed to have killed or wounded around 500 insurgents but less than ten civilians.[991] This last figure seemed suspect as there was evidence that a relaxation of 'courageous restraint' had caused civilian casualty figures to rise again.[992] Over 1,500 fire missions had been called suggesting that the recourse to firepower was creeping back into British tactics. The brigade was awarded three Conspicuous Gallantry Crosses and fifteen Military Crosses. The recipients were drawn from all ranks and age groups: the eldest was Lieutenant Colonel James Martin (The Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment), and one of the youngest was Acting Lance Corporal Kylie Watson, serving with the Royal Army Medical Corps. Posthumous awards were won, as in the past, by soldiers trying to save the lives of wounded comrades. Lance Corporal Stephen Monkhouse (Scots Guards) and Acting Corporal Matthew Stenton (The Royal Dragoon Guards) were both honoured in this way. The two men died together saving the life of a fellow soldier who had been wounded in the Basharan area, north of Lashkar Gah where the popular Major Sean Burchill had been killed in the previous summer. For the paratroopers now flooding into Helmand Province this was their fourth tour in Afghanistan since 2002. Would they find 'a better place', as the spin claimed?

CHAPTER 12
DOING THE HARD-YARDS (SUCCESSFULLY)
Operations Herrick 13-14
October 2010 –October 2011

When the forty-five year old Brigadier James Chiswell assumed command of the British task force in October 2010, at the head of 16 Air Assault Brigade, he bullishly told the media: ‘We do difficult and that’s why we are here’. The son of a former Parachute Regiment commanding officer, Chiswell had taken part in the rescue mission in Sierre Leone in 2000 (Operation Barras) for which he had been awarded a Military Cross. He was now leading paratroopers on their third tour in four years in Helmand. They would face difficulties, but of a very different order to those faced by their predecessors.

The war in Helmand, at least for the British, had changed dramatically by the end of 2010. Chiswell knew, as did all his successors, that there would now only be retrenchment, not expansion. The British manning high point had been reached. Taking in Lashkar Gah, Nad-e Ali and Babaji Districts, the British were now responsible for about 250,000 Helmandis, yielding a ratio of one soldier per twenty-five inhabitants.[993] Applying the ‘Quinlivan formula’ – a debated ratio – this offered sufficient manpower. Even so, Task Force Helmand was only responsible for about one per cent of the total population of Afghanistan, a measure of the scale of the overall task facing ISAF. With the growth of the Afghan security forces, every future brigade would be scaled back and smaller. There would be no more brigade-level British operations. Funding for the Military Stabilisation and Support Teams (MSSTs) would be cut by 90 per cent depriving commanders of dollars for ‘consent winning activities’ such as the Cash for Works programs. Over the course of the year, stepping stones towards an eventual withdrawal had been laid. These included the US-Afghanistan Strategic Dialogue in May, the National Consultative Peace Jirga in June, and the carefully orchestrated Kabul Conference in July.

The height of the American expansion had also been reached. The Obama surge checked the Taliban: in the south-west there had been tangible gains, but eastern

Afghanistan seemed to be sliding backwards. As much as anything, the surge had revealed NATO's continuing dependency on American leadership, manpower and firepower. If the Stars and Stripes had been removed from ISAF's command and control structure, there would have been no ISAF.

The military advantage enjoyed by the British task force had increased significantly. It was one of the unfortunate ironies of the war that Task Force Helmand finally managed to swing the war decisively in its favour, but was only really able to exercise this advantage for a period of one and half years before turning to the task of transition and withdrawal. This was not just a matter of being responsible for a smaller geographical area. Intelligence was immeasurably improved although the British still struggled with a now Byzantine communications infrastructure and dozens of different software applications. The fundamental rule of getting intelligence operators to the frontline – a bottom-up rather than top-down approach – had finally been implemented through American-style COISTs, or Company Intelligence Support Teams. Where in the past soldiers could not even name the predominant tribe in their area, they now knew the names of the owners of compounds surrounding their bases. The British never attempted a Norman-style census of Helmand – the task would have overwhelmed their resources – but accumulated local knowledge gradually improved the focus and granularity of their intelligence. Biometric data collection refined this knowledge. Using American technology, British soldiers began imaging, swabbing and finger-printing villagers. Soon, the databases swelled with tens of thousands of profiles. Through patient detective work, profiles were matched to IED finds and this allowed intelligence officers to generate a much clearer picture of just how many IED teams existed in the British areas. The numbers were not small and they remained intractably difficult to close down decisively.[994]

Voluminous American intelligence at the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) was now feeding special force raids and detention operations. These were reportedly being undertaken on an 'industrial' scale. Between May and December 2010, American reporting suggested that over 7,000 special force raids were conducted and more than 600 Taliban commanders were killed or captured. To give a comparison, over the first half of 2009 (before the arrival of McChrystal), just twenty-seven 'High Value Targets' were killed or captured.[995] This relentless wave of raids had resulted in a further 2,000 insurgents killed and 4,100 captured.[996] By the summer of the following year, author Stephen Grey who followed American operations at the JSOC in Bagram Airfield over a period of six months, reported that 3,000 Taliban commanders had been killed and 8,000

captured over the last year.[997] This amounted to six or seven raids every night – a phenomenal tempo of operations. The high point seemed to be reached in June 2011. With the departure of General Petraeus who had championed the strategy, the numbers began to decline. The probable British contribution to this tally was actually very modest (ISAF statistics suggested a figure of less than five per cent). Before the arrival of Task Force Leatherneck, British special force raids had been few, perhaps one a month. On the few occasions when British brigade commanders quoted special force capture-or-kill statistics, the number was somewhere around one or two dozen over the course of six months. Later, they did ramp up. Following the arrival of the US marines - over a twenty-one month period - there were 377 capture-or-kill raids in Helmand.[998] These resulted in 821 deaths and 1,263 captured insurgents. An inescapable conclusion had to be drawn that the Americans raised the game.

How could this gross disparity between the American special force campaign and the rest be accounted? One possibility was that American reporting was exaggerated. According to ISAF figures, the tally of insurgent commanders killed or captured was far smaller. In 2009, fifty-five had been killed and thirty-four captured. In 2010, forty-nine had been killed and seventy-five captured. The Australian SAS had accounted for twenty of these targets over an eighteen month period.[999] A study by the Afghanistan Analyst Network concluded that between 1 December 2009 and 30 September 2011, there were in the order of 2,365 capture-or-kill raids. These resulted in 3,875 deaths and 7,147 detentions. From these gross numbers, perhaps 174 ‘leaders’ were killed and 501 were detained. This suggested that actually less than five per cent of the total deaths were leadership targets.

The case that American numbers were simply inflated, however, remains implausible. It is more likely that the JSOC was targeting *any* insurgent commander, regardless of their rank, and anyone tangentially related to that individual. The negative effect of this targeting strategy – especially the ‘night raids’ – was significant. The British, by contrast, appeared to restrict their special force operations to higher-level Taliban commanders. This did not imply that British operations caused any less resentment, but the focus may have been more precise. In fairness to the soldiers involved in these operations, the question of Afghan resentment over night raids was not straightforward. Politically, night raids were a gift to President Karzai who exploited them brazenly to demonstrate his nationalist credentials. Eventually, his persistence on this issue would result in an almost total cessation of the raids, except in special circumstances and always with an Afghan

presence (which contingents like the British were already practising anyway). At local level, the picture was less clear. More than one Afghan confided with the British that these targeting operations were the best thing they were doing. In the summer of 2013 when a prominent and violent insurgent commander in Sangin was finally killed by a Predator, one local worthy congratulated the British and averred that this had been the best day in Sangin in the last ten years.

Setting aside the huge intelligence advantages enjoyed by American forces, another reason why the JSOC campaign was more productive was because it was integrated with the conventional campaign. This was the 'secret weapon' identified by authors Christopher Lamb and Evan Munsing who studied McChrystal's special force campaign in Iraq.[1000] The real revolution had been organisational – the manner in which McChrystal created an attitude of collaborative warfare that had previously been missing. Before the conclusion of the war, this would be one of the top ten lessons promulgated by the Pentagon. Special Operations Forces (SOF) and conventional forces had to work together, not in isolation. As a consequence of this lesson, the US Army would begin a program of joint exercises and partnering between special force and conventional units.

The British, it seemed, were less inclined to follow this lesson in the beginning. The historic and cultural breach between 22 SAS and the rest of the army seemed too entrenched. This created the paradox, apparent in reporting in the first half of the war, of a Task Force Helmand directly supported by American special force units – typically Green Berets - but not it appeared by its own special forces. The same pattern had been evident in Iraq, a war in which 22 SAS literally distanced itself from the rest of the British Army by remaining in Baghdad. The main rationale for this was that the strategic target was al-Qaeda, and this fight was in the central provinces of Iraq. But where was Britain's true strategic interest - in an unwinnable war against al-Qaeda inspired gunmen in the Sunni triangle, or in Basra where Britain's reputation was at stake? Al-Qaeda was never beaten, or could be, but many concluded that Britain had been beaten in the south.

In response to the criticism over special force raids, Commander ISAF, General John Allen, was moved to defend his soldiers at the Senate Armed Services Committee. The statistics he offered were insightful, and they contrasted with the Afghanistan Analyst Network findings, albeit they pertained to a later period.[1001] Over 2011-2012, ISAF conducted 2,200 night raids. In half of these raids the targeted individual was captured or killed. In another third, an associate was found. In one fifth, the raid was conducted on an apparently innocent party – which was not a small error ratio. But the important point was

that in nine out of ten raids, no shots were fired. And the percentage of civilian casualties was just 1.5 per cent. According to Allen, from a total of 9,200 night raids, just twenty-seven innocent civilians had been killed or wounded. This last number seemed suspect, but even so, it appeared equally likely that civilian deaths in night raids were being exaggerated by critics. The overwhelming majority of these raids were essentially night-time arrest operations in which no shots were fired, as Allen honestly asserted.

There was another more subtle point about special force operations, cleverly identified by Michael Martin. This related to the other side of special force missions – the operations deliberately set up to kill an individual – or 'kinetic strikes' in the awful euphemism. Intelligence – virtually all the product of American resources – became excellent by the end of the war. But although ISAF knew who was causing trouble it did not necessarily know *why* they were causing trouble. Part of the problem was ISAF's mechanistic portrayal of the enemy as a 'network diagram' and applying 'effects' to the network, a methodology championed in an influential article authored by the Director of the Iraq JSOC from 2004-2007, Colonel Michael Flynn. Flynn's piece attained almost religious status. It resonated with the McChrystal dictum 'attack the network'. Seeking to understand the networks – answering the question, but why are these individuals fighting at all – was not so assiduously followed. The industrial-level special force campaign was 'taking down' individuals who in the eyes of many locals were not villains at all, but rather respected personalities. Some raids were actually killing individuals who wanted to reconcile with ISAF. Martin cited the example of a commander killed in Shin Kalay – presumably by the British – whose car became a memorial shrine. At least in this case, striking one more individual off the target list had probably added another ten to the list, an 'effect' totally contrary to what the campaign was hoping to achieve. The evidence of ISAF's own experience was that no matter how many individuals were eliminated from a network, another simply replaced the captured or killed insurgent. In this respect, the network diagrams seemed to offer portraits of the futility of what ISAF was doing.

This raises the difficult-to-answer question over the entire special force campaign: how was it contributing to the overall war? Did it all amount to another Vietnam-style Phoenix Program, but without the ugly side of this former covert campaign? There was a sense, at least in the American camp, that the industrial-level tempo of operations was a sort of silver bullet, perhaps the silver bullet that would bring the insurgency to its knees. Petraeus was certainly vocal in his defence of the special force campaign, and who could not be dazzled by the numbers cited by the JSOC? The problem with this view is that it simply does not match the wider statistics published by ISAF. The dramatic ramping up of special force

operations took place roughly between the spring of 2009 and the summer of 2010 (the tenures of McChrystal and Petraeus). It would have been reasonable to expect some positive reflection of this attrition on the battlefield. The opposite was true. From 2009-2011, Enemy Initiated Attacks (EIAs) *increased*, rather than decreased. No matter how many Taliban commanders were reportedly 'taken down', the insurgency got stronger. In fact, it is very difficult to find in any ISAF-published metric, evidence of the impact of the special force campaign. There simply was no equivalent dividend to the Iraq surge – the fighting worsened. A decline in EIAs became evident, from the spring of 2011, *following* the large conventional operations, particularly in south-west Afghanistan (although it should be noted that this was relative). If there was a silver bullet, it seems it was being fired by a humble private in a line regiment, not by the special forces.

Setting aside the special force campaign and UAV strikes, it appears that the predatory Apaches were actually the biggest single battlefield killers, certainly in Helmand. This was an inevitable consequence of the great advantage enjoyed by this aerial platform over the flat and mostly open country in the Green Zone. Snipers in foot patrols were also knocking out insurgents in gun fights. Decapitated Taliban gangs replaced leaders quickly, but the remorseless escalator of violence was beginning to bite. Weariness and wariness were setting in. Vital skills in bomb-making were being temporarily lost. The temptation to lie low and not attract the attention of ISAF often proved strong. This was attrition warfare to the bitter end, although in 2010 nobody could confidently predict what that end might look like.

One factor that was having a profound impact on the battlefield was the impact of American surveillance assets. By the end of 2010, according to CENTCOM, there were over sixty persistent surveillance systems (aerostats) arrayed over Helmand and Kandahar Provinces. These were supplemented by nearly twenty medium and high altitude UAVs and over thirty fixed wing, multi-intelligence platforms collecting both imagery and signals intelligence. By the end of the war, in a stunning manifestation of the alacrity and depth of America's defence industry, around twenty-five variants of these 'funnies', or special mission aircraft based on the Beechcraft King Air, had been produced. By contrast, a weakened British defence industry proved incapable of making a single contribution to this important field.

On a monthly basis, this effort was reinforced by a variety of aircraft flying a further 130 signals intelligence missions, nearly eighty imagery intelligence missions, over seventy measurement and signals intelligence missions, and as many as 150 ground-

moving target indicator (GMTI) missions.[1002] This implied that on any one day there were somewhere between fifteen to twenty American aircraft, sucking up the electro-magnetic spectrum and imaging hundreds of square kilometres of south-west Afghanistan to a resolution of less than one metre. All these assets were commanded at regional level. At task force and battlegroup level there were now hundreds of ground and mast-mounted cameras, arrays of unmanned ground sensors (UGS), flocks of smaller tactical and hand-thrown UAVs, and scores of electronic warfare (EW) teams, ranging from individuals monitoring ICOM receivers to more sophisticated direction-finding platforms. The average Pashtun farmer may have been forgiven for wondering whether it was now possible to defecate in a field without someone imaging, recording and measuring the act.

At theatre level, in the rarefied world of highly sensitive intelligence, the National Security Agency (NSA) and GCHQ were adding reams of communications intelligence. Post-war, it would be revealed that GCHQ staff received 156 campaign medals, an indication of the important contribution this organisation made to the war effort. Over half of all targeted operations were reportedly cued by the intelligence gleaned by these government mathematicians, scientists and information technology experts, recalling the close relationship that existed between soldiers and scientists in the Second World War.[1003] Military and civilian human intelligence collection added colour to the picture. Where once there had been a paucity of information, there was now a deluge (creating the same problem that beset the Saigon Combined Intelligence Centre in the Vietnam War, which had to process over a ton of paper every day). This Western effort, of course, could not have succeeded without Afghan intelligence, trained by the Soviets. There was plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that much useful intelligence in fact came from Afghan agencies, in particular the National Directorate of Security (NDS). Where interrogation failed, torture was used - an unfortunate practice that forced the British to hold Taliban detainees beyond the regulatory ninety-six hour detention period, rather than risk handing them over to Afghan colleagues.

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Nad-e Ali and Babaji Districts were now criss-crossed by a matrix of patrol bases and check points, as many as 200 including police outposts. In some areas there was a security force location every few hundred metres. By the time 16 Air Assault Brigade completed its tour, there were British soldiers based in 120 of these security posts. A map view of central Helmand suggested that the strategy of clear-hold-build had finally been vindicated. In truth, it amounted to old-fashioned population control: were ‘hearts and

minds' actually won, or were villagers forced to behave co-operatively? In the Second Boer War, the checkpoints would have been called block houses, but were the Boers won over, or simply forced to concede to the matrix of British bases? The same question hung over Helmand.

In Nad-e Ali and Babaji, this suffocating presence certainly succeeded in making it very hard for insurgents to move around openly. Over time, Taliban gangs, that historically were not actually that strong in these two districts, found themselves squeezed out to the margins. These bases, as previously described, became protected by layers of aerial and ground-based surveillance systems that made the insurgents' job even harder. The RAF deployed yet another Predator B UAV to the province, and surveillance footage available to the troops jumped by 80 per cent in just one year.[1004] This was all deeply unfair, if you were an insurgent. The ANA was also beginning to grow in confidence and capabilities, although it remained completely dependent on American funding and contractor support; and ANP recruits were being churned out of the Helmand Police Training Centre in Lashkar Gah.

3 Para under Lieutenant Colonel James Coates was based in the Chah-e Anjir Triangle (CAT). This area had been ostensibly cleared during Operation Moshtarak but the lack of numbers meant the British, as usual, only really controlled the immediate orbits of their patrol bases. Indeed, the paratroopers were surprised to discover that the main base, FOB Shahzad, was living under constant attacks from the north. The entire area would need to be cleared again, a task that Coates embraced with aggression and cunning. Four major operations would be mounted over the course of the tour, which resulted in six communities decisively locked out to the local trouble makers.

It was 3 Para under Coates that made the important tactical breakthrough in the British war. In this respect, credit must be afforded to this veteran battalion, first pitched into Helmand in the torrid summer of 2006. The tactic was called 'intelligent targeting' and it relied on two American pieces of kit: the astonishingly sophisticated Apache, and the remarkably simple aerostats. As one officer later remarked, it was amazing no one had thought of it earlier. At the heart of 'intelligent targeting' was precisely intelligence: understanding the local players and dynamics, distinguishing hard core insurgents from wavering sympathisers, and striking precisely and at a time of your own choosing. As Coates put it, the key was answering three questions: who were the British fighting? Why were they fighting? And who should be targeted? Targeting did not necessarily mean killing – it could equally mean talking and persuading.

The insurgents in the Chah-e Anjir Triangle seemed unaware of the reach of the aerostats, or believed they could not be seen. In fact, on a clear winter's day, the cameras could confidently identity a human at a considerable range with sufficient granularity to determine whether that person was undertaking some nefarious activity. The paratroopers set about exploiting this system by calling an Apache strike when they were confident the target was valid (necessarily so as the insurgents were commonly too far away for a foot patrol to reach them). Over the course of their tour, 3 Para reckoned they caught close to 130 insurgents in this way, three quarters of which were chased down by Apaches. Only a handful was believed to have got away. They also managed to arrest over 150 suspected insurgents. In total, this single American surveillance system probably accounted for around 250 local trouble makers.

Despite this success, the Chah-e Anjir Triangle remained a dangerous area. The paratroopers encountered over 130 IEDs and suffered five serious casualties from these devices. Appreciating that the trick was to get at the insurgents and not wait for them to get at you, the paratroopers also used helicopters extensively – every other day – to mount small raids into areas where insurgents imagined they were safe. By the end, 3 Para was mounting heliborne raids at a relentless pace which suffocated gangs in their area. Even allowing for the self-serving reporting of units, it is undeniable that 3 Para's war over the winter of 2010-2011 witnessed the most interesting and effective evolution of tactics, on the British side, since the war became stalemated. Very soon, every other battlegroup was copying 3 Para, with similar results. Aerostats and 'shooters', in American parlance, had proved the winning tactical combination. Duck shooters might equally have been an appropriate term.

The British were also talking as well as fighting, building as well as destroying. This was what the Royal Irish commanding officer described as 'doing the COIN [Counter-Insurgency] hard yards'. It was not glamorous work. It required infinite patience and a resignation to 'the Afghan way of doing things'. It offered lousy material for war stories. It bored young soldiers stuck on cordons while a shura negotiating the building of a new culvert was taking place in a nearby compound. Mortarmen and gunners did press-ups to pass the time, their bombs and shells no longer needed. Dropping ordnance on your enemy was as sinful as smoking and banished. This was the way the British would be leaving Helmand, tip-toeing out of the room they had carelessly gate-crashed. An RAF sergeant working in an MSST with 2 Para captured this reality with amused resignation: 'The realities…are long hours; endless Shuras dealing with crowds of LN's [Local Nationals] all wanting your attention at once, constant demands for money, being worn down and

frustrated by daily dealings with the locals'.[1005] Known as 'the Bank of Babaji' by local farmers, the worn-down sergeant concluded that 'nothing gets done quickly here', and 'everybody wants something for nothing'.

Winning the war of perceptions – as opposed to gun fights in the Green Zone - was proving as difficult as ever. Almost a decade after American forces first entered Afghanistan, surveys showed that many rural Afghans still had no clear idea of the events of September 11 and could not explain the presence of foreign soldiers in their fields.[1006] A majority of Helmandis disapproved of military operations and could perceive no obvious benefits from the international presence in their districts. The town demonstrating the least support for ISAF, unsurprisingly, was Sangin. Just one in seven residents approved of operations against the Taliban - a measure of just how self-deluding British reports of progress in Sangin had been right up to the British withdrawal.[1007] The strategy of separating the insurgent from the population in order to protect the latter was also in question. Half of all Helmandis did not believe that ISAF was protecting civilians; indeed, a majority erroneously believed that the foreign forces were responsible for the majority of civilian deaths.[1008]

More widely, Afghanistan was taking on the character of a thoroughly corrupted war economy, a situation that was serving to perpetuate the conflict at a comfortable and persistent low-level. Mullah Omar may have railed about expelling the foreigners but his field commanders were ruing the day when ISAF would finally pack its bags and head home (towards the end of the war, some insurgent gangs started deliberately attacking ISAF in the vain hope they might persuade Western soldiers to remain a little longer). The reasons were not hard to uncover. Many were making an awful lot of money out of jihad. At the end of 2009, Hillary Clinton complained that 'one of the major sources of funding for the Taliban is … protection money'.[1009] The following summer the House of Representatives published a report damning the manner in which $2.16 billion's worth of funding had been mismanaged in a so-called 'Host Nation Trucking' contract.[1010] Under this generous arrangement, eight Afghan, Arab and American firms were granted the contracts for between 6,000 and 8,000 truck missions per month, accounting for about 70 percent of supplies arriving overland in Afghanistan. A typical convoy comprised of 300 trucks protected by several hundred guards. These were frequently attacked with loss of lives. To mitigate the risks, the trucking firms paid 'tens of millions' of dollars to highway warlords, who in turn would pay off the Taliban. Everybody denied this was happening, however transparent to a casual observer. One firm complained that it was paying between

$1,000 and $10,000 in bribes to every governor, police chief and military chief through whose territory it transited.

If the trucking mafias were one example of war profiteering, the other was the opium trade. The less secure districts were unsurprisingly the districts with the largest opium poppy harvests. In 2010, the Afghan anti-narcotics police would make their largest ever seizure of heroin, with a 5,700 kilogram haul – or around 25 per cent of the British annual domestic consumption. The importance of this seizure was, however, better measured against Afghan consumption. This was now a country where one in eight adult males was a drug addict of some type.

In Helmand the hand-over of units proceeded like a well-worn routine. The Irish Guards under Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Ghika took over the mentoring role of 3/215 Corps from the Royal Scots Borderers (1 Scots). At Lashkar Gah, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (5 Scots) took over the police training role from 1 Mercians (Cheshires). 2 Para, commanded by Lieutenant Andy Harrison did a straight swap with the Gurkhas in Babaji district. This battalion was reinforced by B Company, 3 Para and a company from 5 Scots. 3 Para, as we have seen, went to the Chah-e Anjir Triangle. In the centre of the British area, the Royal Irish under Lieutenant Colonel Weir picked up the reins from the Lancasters. Armoured support was provided by 2 Royal Tank Regiment (2 RTR) that replaced the Royal Dragoon Guards (RDG).

In southern Nad-e Ali, A Company 1 Royal Irish found itself split between six new bases and ‘in conflict with the enemy most days, every day in fact’.[1011] Eventually a battalion-level operation would be mounted in late October (Operation Tor Kanjak IV ‘Black Thorn’) to clear the area. In the north, where a gang of foreign fighters had camped, B Company was experiencing similar high levels of fighting and would lose three rangers, wounded early in the tour by an IED. This prompted the visiting RSM to comment: ‘You get a sense of what it must have been like in the Great War, living below parapets where a raised head could attract deadly fire, soldiers huddled together in small groups enjoying a common interest like a card game or amusing story’.[1012] When Brigadier Chiswell visited the rangers of B Company, he also found himself under attack.

In October, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government was due to publish its first Strategic Defence and Security Review. This publication was preceded by weeks of sniping as retired admirals, generals and air chief marshals drew the battle lines for their respective services. So much hot air and despair had not been witnessed for many years, with some justification. Despite Liam Fox’s assurance that Britain’s global role was a

necessity and not a luxury it was obvious there would be cuts, probably savage.[1013] There was talk of down-sizing the Royal Navy to an irrelevant twelve surface combatants. The RAF was in a spin over rumours the Tornado fleet would be grounded. The army feared for its tank fleet. All these rumours were exaggerated and the strategic arguments and counter-arguments, largely pointless. The fact was that the shape and size of Britain's armed forces were largely being determined by constrained budgets and defence contracts to protect 'British jobs'. Future threats and the roles of the armed forces were secondary considerations. The Defence Select Committee was quite right when it later observed that it could 'divine no strategic vision' in the document.

The Strategic Defence and Security Review was preceded by the publication of *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, an overview of the probable threats facing Britain in the new century produced by the newly-formed National Security Council (NSC). This colloquy was modelled on the American NSC, but a quite different organisation emerged. The former was an open and combative forum in which different departments – State, Defense, the CIA, NSA, and DIA – argued their cases, and from which debate the president took a decision. This American philosophy is known as 'competitive analysis' - an anathema in British intelligence practice. For historic and cultural reasons, the British have always eschewed such practice, and based their decision-making on a consensual assessment crystallised in the Top Secret JIC (Joint Intelligence Committee) papers. The problem with the British approach, adumbrated by many authors, is twofold. First, consensus frequently serves up a plate so bland that as one former minister put it, JIC papers told him little he could not have gleaned from a *Times* editorial. And second, authors drafting the papers know what the consensus is; crudely, 'what the minister wants to hear', and more importantly, what would not be acceptable to say. Even before a single word has been committed to paper, the possibilities of offering alternative or challenging views are small. Churchill quipped you don't have to be polite in a war - you only have to be right – but he was fighting against a deeply-held British cultural aversion to disagreement (as opposed to the safe, theatrical confrontation in Parliament, at which the British excel). Being 'off message' was not just a sin in an age of spin - it was also 'bad form'. The British would almost certainly have helped themselves if they had embraced disputation, if not a dose of frank rudeness. As a consequence, the British system has always been vulnerable to the danger of being an exercise in safe group-think – 'Yes Minister', indeed. The newly-founded British NSC also quickly gave the impression, whether or not founded in fact, that its principal role was actually to agree 'positive messaging', or security as spin. The 'tactical' nature of discussions, rather than debate on a

strategic scale, also attracted criticism.

William Hague, the Foreign Secretary, championed *A Strong Britain* in the face of sceptical commentators. In many respects this *was* an odd and thin publication. Much of the introduction was devoted to criticising the last lot, and there were other aspects of the document that begged questions. The centrepiece of the review was a matrix of tiered threats – the National Security Risk Assessment – the chief novelty of the document. It appears this had been largely devised by an outsider, not by military staffs, security staffs, or government officials with policy and executive responsibilities for Britain's defence and security policy. The elevation of this individual seems to have been related to his employment with Baroness Pauline Neville-Jones, the Security Minister.

In effect, British defence and security policy, it appears, was 'contracted out' to an unaccountable individual with good connections, who then sold a voguish threat matrix to uncritical officials. If this was the case, the authors of previous Defence White Papers would have turned in their graves. This seemed to reflect a culture that favoured fad over difficult and critical thought, and management-speak over clear English: the curious world of 'effects', 'solution spaces' and 'continuous modulated engagement'. Fortunately for the government, the media did not question the provenance of the threat matrix and entirely missed that it appeared to have been invented by an unaccountable advisor. The real problem with the matrix, regardless of who made it up, was that it disregarded Blaise Pascal's timeless wisdom: 'Fear of harm ought to be proportional not merely to the gravity of the event, but also to the probability of the event'.

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For the first time in a defence review, major accidents and natural disasters were classed as threats to national security where in the past they would simply have been viewed for what they were, rare civil emergencies. Britain's last major flood in 1953 killed 307 people. It was a tragedy but the country's security was not imperilled. The threat of a pandemic was judged as 'one of the highest we face'. Britain had only recently experienced a flu pandemic that provoked great controversy. An exaggeration of the threat posed by this pandemic had resulted in the expenditure of over £1 billion's worth of flu jabs that were not required. Critics suspected dark collusion with the pharmaceutical industry. Perversely, the lesson learned from this costly experience seems not to have been that a more measured approach was needed, but rather that pandemics constituted threats to national security. The Black Death failed to threaten the security of the British Isles. It was difficult to understand why *A Strong Britain* saw Armageddon in swine flu. Some

18,500 people were believed to have been killed by this latter virus worldwide. Every year, around 370,000 were dying from seasonal flu.[1014] Should the common cold be added to the British Army's list of security concerns?

Cyberwarfare, which the media turned into sensational headlines, was judged to be a tier one threat to Britain. Cybercrime was unarguably a serious global policing problem. Cyber-espionage, whether industrial or state-led, was also a significant area of concern, led by a voracious and shameless China. Cyber-sabotage, notably the Stuxnet virus, was beginning to make a sinister entrance. Cyberwarfare, by comparison, had proved a flop. Estonia had suffered a cyber-attack originating from Russia at the beginning of the decade which was noteworthy for its novelty but little else. Georgia had also suffered a cyber-attack during a five day spat with Russia in the summer of 2008. This short conflict had not been decided by defaced webpages but by the more pressing concern of a regiment of T-72 tanks rolling towards the Georgian capital. The document cited the millions of cyber-attacks that had reportedly been logged during the Beijing Olympics, but omitted to note that these had no impact whatsoever on what was a fantastically successful event. The chief problem with the entire section on 'cyber' was that it was clear the writer did not understand the subject and was mostly repeating bromides sprinkled with some hastily-gathered statistics.

Terrorism was also judged to be a tier one threat despite the consistent failure of radical violence to upset the basic stability of British society, or of any other Western democracy for that matter. In Britain, the most serious terrorist attack in modern times (in terms of economic cost) was the 1993 Bishopsgate bomb. This had no significant or long-lasting effect on London at all. The Nineties was a boom decade and the City of London led the exuberant charge. Irish Republican terrorism across the water was quite a different matter. A sustained terrorist campaign over a thirty year period had altered the political landscape of Ulster. The Irish Republican Army did not attain its maximal goal of a united Ireland but the marginalisation of the Catholic minority in Ulster ended and a peace process offered better prospects for this troubled corner of the island. Dissident Republican attacks were a growing menace. There had been fifteen attacks in 2008, twenty-two attacks in 2009 and forty-four attacks in 2010. But unless you lived in Ulster these incidents barely received mention in the media. 'The troubles' were, as they had been in the past, something that happened across the water.

The threat of a nuclear, biological or chemical attack by terrorists was also judged a tier one threat. This spectre had been raised by American intelligence agencies at the end of

the Cold War and was still raising its head even after the embarrassment of Iraq's non-existent weapons of mass destruction and the pathetic record of attempted attacks by assorted terrorists, anarchists and nutters in the intervening years. If there was any conclusion to be drawn from the history of such attacks it was that they were exceedingly rare, very difficult to pull off, and largely ineffectual. It was perhaps not surprising that the Public Administration Select Committee concluded that the answer to the question – 'Who does UK national security policy? - was 'no one'.

The Strategic Defence and Security Review was finally published on 19 October. By then its contents had been mostly leaked to the media. It would have been ungenerous not to feel sympathy for the Defence Secretary, Dr Liam Fox. Party-politicking aside it was the case that the government had inherited an unsustainable financial mess which only had one remedy – more defence cuts. An eleventh hour intervention by the Prime Minister managed to limit these cuts to 8 per cent of the defence budget but when inflation was factored in, these amounted to something closer to double this percentage over the lifetime of the sitting Parliament. Two future aircraft carriers stole the headlines, HMS *Queen Elizabeth II* and HMS *Prince of Wales*. These two ships had been proposed in the Strategic Defence Review of 1998. A series of poor procurement decisions over the intervening twelve years had created a situation where the two ships were now going to cost an estimated £5.2 billion and they were going to be brought into service without an aircraft, the American Joint Strike Fighter (JSF), an order hurriedly revised downwards from 138 aircraft to just forty odd aircraft for both the Royal Navy and RAF, although it was unlikely even this number would be procured due to the mounting costs of the troubled program. Just twelve aircraft would probably be deployed on one carrier. For a number of reasons, it appeared that Britain would not have a full carrier capability before 2030 anyway.

The rationale for procuring large aircraft carriers is that a larger ship enjoys a better 'surge sortie rate', a key measure of the punch of an aircraft carrier (known as 'Alpha Strikes' in US Navy parlance). This is the number of aircraft that can be surged over a defined period, in support of a specific operation. By the time the first fully operational carrier was due to be brought into service, the Rpyal Navy would in fact have a similar sortie rate to that which it enjoyed forty years previously in the Falklands Conflict, with smaller carriers and Sea Harriers. Theoretically, the new carriers would be capable of surging 108 aircraft in one day, but this requirement was predicated on a raft of factors, the most important of which was having thirty-six aircraft on board. This was a totally unrealistic assumption given the small number of aircraft being procured (total fleet

inventory should never be confused with actual, available aircraft which is always a not insignificantly smaller number).[1015] The Sea Harriers, in the meantime, were scrapped, saving £1.5 billion.[1016] The US Marine Corps acquired the British Harriers for a snip, and planned to keep its own fleet of AV-8 Harriers flying until 2030.

In the interim, HMS *Ark Royal*, the Royal Navy's flag ship would also be decommissioned, its rationale gone. HMS *Illustrious* would only limp on until 2014 leaving the Navy with just HMS *Ocean*, a troop carrier, as the only platform capable of supporting helicopter but not fixed-wing operations. HMS *Bulwark*, a troop carrier capable of supporting just two Chinook helicopters would become the Royal Navy's flagship – what a humiliation. Fox defended these losses on the grounds that Britain could still project air power through its RAF Tornado and Typhoon fleets but the argument was weak. When the dust settled it transpired that Britain would only maintain a single squadron of Tornado GR.4 as a deployable unit committed to NATO. This was as insignificant a force as it was a startling revelation of the collapse of British aerial combat power. And the entire Tornado force would be disbanded by 2018 anyway.

One of the curious aspects of the entire saga of the aircraft carriers was the manner in which their necessity was questioned. In the last generation Britain had fought a conflict which it had only been able to pursue because it enjoyed a carrier capability. The re-taking of the Falkland Islands had been the tightest of affairs. The Sea Harriers had only just entered service, after a similar cost-cutting exercise had left the Royal Navy without an offensive Fleet Air Arm, and the Defence Secretary, John Nott, had been sharpening his knife to cut even this capability. In more recent times, the successful intervention in Sierra Leone (Operation Palliser), an example of a British limited military intervention at its best, had also been possible thanks to the navy's carrier capability, in this case HMS *Illustrious* escorted by HMS *Argyll*. In the intervening years the Royal Navy's carriers had taken part in every war, as well as in other crises, adding flexibility to the British military response and in some cases acting as the indispensable anchor of that response, such as in the seizure of the Al Faw peninsula in the second Gulf War. The national debt seemed to affect the national memory, as well as the national bank balance.

The really shocking announcement did not relate to the carriers, whether or not the navy had aircraft to put on them, but that the surface fleet was going to be reduced to less than twenty ships. This was a puny force. The navy had never been smaller in its entire history. During the Falklands Conflict the navy had close to fifty surface ships, thanks to some deft manoeuvring by the First Sea Lord who managed to steer a clever course

through the proposed Nott defence cuts, and it needed them. In the 1998 Strategic Defence Review it was concluded the navy could not fall safely fall below thirty-two surface ships. Now it was being reduced to nineteen ships and even this number was under threat. Given maintenance schedules this meant that on any day of the year, half this number of ships was actually available to the Royal Navy. A manpower crisis in the navy, provoked by the relentless defence cuts, made matters worse. This was no longer a fleet, it was a flotilla. As if to add salt to wounds, three days after the announced cuts, HMS *Astute,* the navy's latest nuclear, hunter-killer submarine ran aground on a shingle bank off the Isle of Skye. Had the Royal Navy ever sunk so low?

The RAF hardly fared better. The termination of the troubled Nimrod MRA.4 program was not a surprise, although it created an eye-wateringly expensive pile of scrap. The reduction of the Tornado and Typhoon fleets was also expected. The air force would now be left with a mixed fleet of a 1970s era multi-role fighter, and a modern fighter which it could not use in Afghanistan.

Of all the procurement scandals of this period, Eurofighter Typhoon was probably the biggest headache of successive governments. It was a political aircraft foisted on the service by the Thatcher government and a powerful industrial lobby (in the same way that the Rapier missile which proved a dismal failure in the Falklands Conflict was subsequently procured for the army to boost the share price of BAe at flotation). What was good for British Aerospace would be good for the RAF – so the argument ran. This proved not to be the case.

Eurofighter Typhoon began life as the BAe P.110 demonstrator aircraft in the early 1980s. There was both a political and industrial backdrop to this aircraft. The Conservative Party had gained electoral advantage by accusing the Labour Party of neglecting Britain's air defences, an emotive theme coloured by the experience of the Battle of Britain. The RAF was happy to play along with this appeal as it promised more fighter aircraft. More urgently, with the end of the Panavia Tornado production line in sight, work needed to be found for Britain's aerospace workers. The arguments made by MP Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (to protect jobs in his own constituency in Edinburgh West) are worth quoting at length as every modern defence secretary has faced them:

'The P110 today, quite simply, has a similar significance for the security of Britain as the Spitfire had in its day… it is estimated that by the end of the decade at least 50, 000 jobs in the aerospace industry and its suppliers in the supply and service industries may depend on it… towards the end of the 1980s, Tornado orders will be largely fulfilled and,

unless other programmes arrive to fill the gap, the large production base and skilled work force built up to meet current commitments will be run down…if the P110 does not go ahead it could lead to an irrevocable loss of the associated indigenous technologies. Yet the military need for such systems will not disappear and, when a new fighter aircraft is finally ordered for the RAF, as must eventually occur, the capability to make vital elements will have vanished… High technology does not stand still; and if that profitable area of British expertise is to be maintained and extended industry needs to receive timely Government encouragement. Therefore, support for the P110 is crucial for industry, for continuing technological advance and for employment…'[1017]

The problem with these not invalid arguments was that the British government balked at funding the development of a new fighter aircraft, and sought a solution in a pan-European collaborative approach. This had been a not entirely unsuccessful approach with the Panavia Tornado, although there were lessons in this procurement which perhaps should have been heeded more closely. The chief lesson was that every European parliamentarian in the partner nations – eventually, Germany, Italy, and Spain – shared Lord Douglas-Hamilton's sentiments. Eurofighter Typhoon (even the name provoked squabbles) became a mechanism for justifying and protecting domestic industries, at all costs. The principle of national *juste retour* contributed to inefficient and expensive procurement and production processes. Soon the program was beset with disagreements and delays which drove up these costs. In 1988, Parliament was informed that the cost of the project would be £7 billion. This proved to be an underestimation by a factor of five. By 2003 the project had cost the taxpayer over £20 billion, after which year the MOD refused to reveal the costs of Typhoon on the grounds of commercial sensitivity. Not a single operational aircraft was flying for this princely disbursement of taxpayers' money. Even organisations like the National Audit Office (NAO) were denied the information, which made this office's annual report on MOD spend a not fully frank account of the status of defence expenditure. When the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government assumed power in 2010, the costs of the project were once again published in the NAO's annual report on defence procurement. It transpired that the lifetime costs of this aircraft were in the order of £37 billion.

Other arguments also proved unfounded: Typhoon did not win many export orders (any more than the Tornado); it did not offer 'better performance for its cost than any competitor expected to be available between 1989 and 2000', indeed, it did not even fly; and it did not produce 'greater benefits both to our Armed Services and to our industries,

and more jobs at the same time'. In Britain, the aircraft became hopelessly entangled with some murky politics - the controversial deals with Saudi Arabia, viewed as the salvation of Britain's aerospace industry. A body of opinion grew in the RAF against an aircraft that was becoming a budgetary millstone, but it was too late to change course. Over time the program became a mechanism for sustaining jobs in the re-branded BAE Systems, but it was providing no aircraft to the RAF. The importance of this single program to British defence industry cannot be overstated. In 2013, the largest MOD post-main gate equipment project, by value, was the Typhoon and Typhoon Future Capability Programme with a forecast cost of £18.1 billion, or three times the cost of the controversial carriers. [1018]

The initial projected procurement was estimated at 250 aircraft. In 1997 the Labour government signed an 'unbreakable' deal to procure 232 of these aircraft, which it could not afford and then broke. This was again revised downwards to perhaps 160 but even this number was not going to survive because of significant software differences between the first Tranche of aircraft and the second two Tranches. Eventually, twenty years later, fifty-four Tranche 1 aircraft were delivered to the RAF, but these had limited capability, and shockingly, their retirement was announced after seven years' service, during which period they had served no useful role. Sixty-seven Tranche 2 aircraft followed, but twenty-four were then taken from the RAF and sold to Saudi Arabia, confirming in some jaundiced service opinion that the RAF had become a device for keeping BAE Systems afloat. These aircraft also lacked full capabilities. The number of trained pilots who could actually use this aircraft effectively would have stunned the civilian taxpayer. As a consequence of a plethora of technical and contractual issues Typhoon could not be deployed to Afghanistan. Bi-annually, this unarguably elegant aircraft wowed the crowds at the Farnborough Air Show, but it never wowed a single soldier on a frontline. It was not until 2013 that Typhoon actually dropped a laser-guided bomb on a range (the Paveway II). The RAF could do this in the 1970s. Taking the long view (from the period of the Thatcher governments), the RAF had been reduced from around thirty odd fighter squadrons to just six, or slightly larger than the Belgian Air Force. Finally, due to the spiralling costs just forty Tranche 3 aircraft were ordered for the RAF, again without full capabilities. With more development, this last Tranche will offer the aircraft the RAF believed it was procuring in the early 1980s. The true figure of operational Typhoon eventually available to the RAF will be a number not insignificantly smaller than one hundred.

In the meantime, the political and technological landscape had greatly changed. The Soviet threat evaporated and with it the 1970s orthodoxies (and raging arguments) over

Britain's air defences. Export orders were won: by SAAB's Gripen in Brazil, the Dassault Rafale in India, and Boeing's F-15 in Singapore. In fact, over this period, Eurofighter Typhoon was entered into fighter bids in Greece, India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Norway, and Brazil - and lost in all of them. Russian combat aircraft continued to prove popular in the Middle East and elsewhere in the developing world (224 sold from 2009-2012). By the 2010s, Chinese reverse-engineered and far cheaper aircraft began to win orders. More significantly, Lockheed Martin's F-35 Joint Strike Fighter became 'the only game in town', threatening the very rationale of the Typhoon. Typhoon could yet recover from this poor history, but by the mid-decade it was rumoured the aircraft might be retired from RAF service by 2030. If this is the case, a fifty year-long procurement will have yielded an aircraft with its full range of capabilities, for just over a decade. Even by the standards of extravagant waste in American combat aircraft programs, Eurofighter Typhoon remains a shining example of how not to procure a modern fighter aircraft.

Typhoon skewed RAF budgets for a generation. It was the TSR-2 of its time, with the difference that the Defence Secretary of the time, Dennis Healey, had the courage to cancel the ruinous TSR-2 project. Nobody could summon the courage to cancel Eurofighter Typhoon, although the German government came close to sinking the project. Like the TSR-2 fiasco, the proposed replacement (the American F-111) also hit prohibitive cost over-runs, the same rock on which the Joint Strike Fighter was floundering. In the 1970s, the RAF had to settle for cheaper aircraft that served it perfectly well. Dennis Healey's words on the matter were as relevant in 2010 as they were in 1965: 'The aircraft firms…were trying to get the Government on the hook and understated the cost. But TSR-2 cost far more than even their private estimates, and so I have no doubt about the decision to cancel'.[1019]

When faced with a choice between protecting industry or the RAF, successive governments acquiesced to the industrial lobby. Michael Portillo once observed that the chairman of a well-known British defence firm had better access to 10 Downing Street than he enjoyed as defence secretary (a firm which he duly joined as a non-executive director, after leaving office). The argument that saving 'British jobs' was paramount was spurious. BAE remorselessly shed British jobs, in parallel with the loss of air force jobs. Everyone lost. And even these bleak figures were misleading. The service could now only deploy a token force of 1970's era jets to support ground operations. A more ruinous example of defence industrial policy would be hard to find.

The army was expected to survive the cuts better than the other two services, but only marginally. A second British government took the historically unprecedented decision to reduce the size of the army (by 7,000 personnel) in the middle of a war. The overall size of the force had now collapsed below the symbolic 100,000 threshold. Six brigades would be reduced to five brigades. The army would lose 40 per cent of its tanks and 35 per cent of its heavy artillery but this proved to be a 'back of the fag packet' calculation. Warfare is an industrial and manpower-intensive endeavour. Britain was bankrupt in both capacities but mostly because she had chosen to be, not because this was inevitable. Blaming the previous Labour government for financial mismanagement could not hide the fact that it had been Conservative governments in the 1980s that had started the decline. The headline percentages proved to be false and the cuts were even steeper. Less than fifty tanks were initially kept in service for training – the remainder were put in storage. The country that invented the tank could now only apparently afford to run one regiment of these vehicles, or less than virtually every other NATO country including the minnows. It was also announced that around 1,800 tracked vehicles including the entire CVR(T) and FV430 fleets would be retired. Without replacement vehicles yet in service, this implied that the Royal Armoured Corps was effectively about to become a corps without a rationale – cavalrymen without horses or internal combustion engines. Only two infantry battalions were allowed to retain their Warrior APCs. The other thirty-four infantry battalions were re-roled as light battalions to feed the Afghanistan War. In effect, the British Army had been propelled back to the 1920s and was now a small motorised force. This was hardly the vision that proponents of 'the Revolution in Military Affairs' had imagined just ten years previously.

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In early November, the governor of Helmand, Gulab Mangal visited London. The purpose of this visit was to set the scene for the forthcoming NATO conference in Lisbon. The British government needed the governor to portray a province ripe for hand-over, with a little more work, and Mangal played his part to perfection. In 2009, he told reporters the percentage of cultivation of the opium poppy had fallen by 33.7 per cent. A cursory examination of UNODC's annual survey of the Afghan poppy crop would have showed this claim was misleading. The renovated Kajaki dam, he suggested, had doubled power generation in the area. Unfortunately, this was also untrue. More statistics demonstrating progress were trotted out to the nodding approval of his hosts. The conclusion that this purported progress offered was that British forces might safely withdraw by 2014, the same message the Prime Minister was about to deliver at Lisbon. Perhaps the most

important gesture of his trip – which went largely unreported – was a visit to the National Memorial Arboretum, where he met the family of a soldier killed in Afghanistan.

The twenty-eight members of NATO met in Lisbon on the weekend of 20 November. In Helmand, the British task force had just suffered its 100th fatality that year, Guardsman Christopher Davies, a twenty-two year old from St Helens. The Russian President joined the conference to discuss Russian-NATO cooperation, a sign of the long if hesitant thaw in East-West relations (which would imminently be reversed by the Ukrainian conflict). Unfortunately, the conference met against the backdrop of the worst crisis between ISAF and Karzai. In a move that dismayed Petraeus, Karzai threatened to close down all Private Security Companies (PSCs) in Afghanistan. Such a measure would have caused an overnight collapse of the entire development mission – it was only because of the extensive private security provision that aid was being furnished to Afghanistan at all. Following much haggling, it was agreed that an Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF) would assume the role of providing convoy and fixed site protection. The saga that followed could fill a small chapter. Suffice to say that three years later, the APPF, which might better have been titled the Afghan Public Extortion Force had still not been stood up properly, and was close to financial meltdown after it transpired that a small number of individuals had siphoned off the funds committed to the force into private bank accounts. The PSCs in the meantime continued to operate, re-branded as 'risk management companies'. The story of the APPF was more complicated than this summary suggests, but what was not problematical was an expectation that this was how the APPF story would inevitably end.

The public aim of the Lisbon conference was to discuss 'transition' – NATO's exit strategy – but the truth was that all the backroom dealing had already been concluded prior to the conference. There would be no haggling or late night discussions, only a carefully stage-managed statement presented by the triumvirate of President Karzai, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the NATO Secretary General, and Ban Ki-Moon, the UN Secretary General. The latter stated that 2015 would be the date by which time Afghans would be masters of their own house, without elaborating on the state of that house. This was both a timetable for withdrawal and a conditions-based withdrawal, but nobody could convincingly explain this contradiction. The Prime Minister did not even try. 'I couldn't be more clear about what 2015 is,' Cameron tersely told reporters, 'and what it means'.[1020]

Training the ANA and police (now rebranded the Afghan Uniformed Police, AUP, in February) remained the key to ISAF's withdrawal, and the process of embedded

partnering was now well established. Reaching a stage where the Afghan security forces could stand on their own two feet was a wholly different matter. By the summer of 2010, there were over 105,000 policemen in Afghanistan.[1021] Many were corrupt and useless but it was still preferable that they remained in the pay of the government (the US government which was funding their salaries) than in the pay of the Taliban. The question of pay had now finally been addressed: a patrolman could earn as much as $180 per month; a police captain could look forward to a take-home salary of $345. Even with these incentives personnel turn-over was debilitating the force. Over a quarter of trained policemen were quitting every year – a deep malaise seemed to be undermining ISAF efforts to create a trustworthy and permanent police force. Pay for senior police officers was less of a problem. In opium-growing provinces wealthy Afghans were reportedly paying up to $400,000 for a police post, happy in the knowledge that once installed as commanders they would recoup this outlay within one year through extortion and illegal taxes.

At least it could be claimed that the quality of recruits was improving. The failure rate due to positive opiate drug testing at the Helmand Police Training Centre had fallen from around 10 per cent to about 2 per cent. The canniboid failure rate remained stubbornly high – just under half of all policemen trained by the British were addicted to cannabis, an addiction that encouraged their propensity to take bribes. There were now (on paper) 7,000 policemen in Helmand (just sixteen of which were female) but encouraging these new recruits to serve outside the comfortable and safe district of Lashkar Gah continued to be a challenge.[1022] Just getting these policemen to do anything that did not involve some sort of reward was also still proving difficult as Captain Terry Patton serving with 2 Para recalled: ‘The only time one really saw them was when they turned up looking for something. The opportunity to request ANP for patrols or other tasks relied upon what and how much you could give them, ranging from fuel for their vehicles and generators to bottled water, mini flares and clothing’.[1023] The lack of education was also breath taking: in some areas not a single policeman was literate, including the police chiefs.

Notwithstanding the challenges of raising a credible police force the British were proudly reporting that the Helmand Police Training Centre had celebrated its first birthday on 5 December and that it has churned out 1,593 policemen and 160 commanders. By the end of the year it would reach its milestone of 2,000 recruits.[1024] By the early summer of the following year, the number topped 3,000 – an efficient training process was underway.[1025]

The critical weakness with the police was neither numbers nor the quality of the training – both of which did improve from the efforts of the British and American trainers - but rather stemmed from a failure to establish a viable justice system. No amount of trained policemen, honest or dishonest, could make up for this deficiency. At the beginning of 2010 there were only one judge and two prosecutors outside the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah. By the end of the year, this number had been raised by appointing prosecutors to 'secured' districts but the dispensation of justice remained overwhelmingly in the hands of village elders, or Taliban courts.

There were now 134,000 ANA, and the fledgling Afghan air force was sitting on a fleet of forty-six aircraft. These numbers were also misleading. Contradicting the ISAF narrative of progress, a US General Auditors Office report issued in January concluded that not one of the 163 ANA units was capable of operating independently of ISAF.[1026] As with the police, retention remained an all-consuming problem. Far too many recruits were seeping through a system that could only retain the loyalty of its soldiers for one or two years. The cost of all this effort to the American taxpayer was astronomical. The 2010 DOD Appropriations Act recorded a cumulative total of $25.23 billion awarded to the Afghan Security Forces Fund since the beginning of the war. Almost coincident with the passing of the act, President Karzai made the honest if dispiriting observation that this level of financial support would be required until at least 2024.

As concerning was an almost inevitable factionalism in the swelling Afghan National Army. A survey by International Crisis Group found four such groups.[1027] Pashtuns had allied themselves with Defence Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak and the *Mahaz-e Milliy-e Islami* political party; Tajiks were siding with the Interior Minister Bismullah Khan and the *Shura-ye Nazar*; Uzbeks were aligned with their own man in the Ministry of Defence, General Hamayoun Fauzi; and Hazaras had naturally fallen under the command of the Hazara Lieutenant General Baz Mohammad Jawhari. This fragmentation of loyalties was as natural to Afghans as resistance to foreign invaders, and boded poorly for the future.

In a foretaste of the likely pattern of events once the British started withdrawing, 16 Air Assault Brigade found itself having to recapture ground encroached by emboldened insurgent gangs. In December 2009, the Royal Marines had cleared the village of Zarghun Kalay, in north Nad-e Ali, after a forty-eight hour battle in miserable weather. Now it was back in Taliban hands. At the end of November, the Royal Irish duly mounted an air assault operation to recapture the village, in an area known as 'the Red Wedge' to the troops, killing eleven insurgents. In fact, in the first two-and-a half months of their tour, B

Company 1 Royal Irish was involved in 546 engagements with insurgents in this area, the majority of which were futile shootouts between the two sides.[1028] In Operation Moshtarak, the Kharotei village of Naqelabad Kalay had been a main objective, along with the village of Showal. Barely ten months after the Royal Welsh had 'taken' Naqelabad Kalay, 3 Para had to do it all over again. In the event, A Company 3 Para was able to walk into the village without firing a shot, thanks to careful preparatory operations in the preceding weeks, including a smart night raid that resulted in seven captured insurgents. The battlegroup followed this up with a night infiltration of Naqelabad Kalay on 10 November. When a group of around twenty insurgents attempted to challenge the paratroopers, an air strike was called that decisively ended the fight. It later transpired that a foreign fighter commander had been killed in the strike.

C Company 3 Para was tasked with the job of clearing an area further east, known as 'Ghazni Street' to the troops. Over a period of a month, around forty insurgents were reportedly killed and a shadow Taliban governor was captured. In the biggest single coup, a group of twelve insurgents hiding in a compound were killed by two Hellfire missiles. A further eight were later reportedly killed by a 500 pound bomb dropped by an RAF Tornado. When the paratroopers finally assaulted the area, protected by Mastiffs crewed by 2 RTR, a further four insurgents were killed. One of the tank crewmen escaped serious injury when a bullet struck his helmet, but this was the only casualty suffered by the British. The combination of aerial surveillance and precise firepower, combined with aggressive tactics on the ground, was proving decisive. A hoard of machine guns was recovered and as so often happened in the past, the area went quiet for a few weeks as the Taliban recovered from their losses and appointed new commanders.

In the village of Char Coucha ('Four Alleys'), the sister battalion 2 Para found itself clearing the settlement yet again in Operation Kapcha Kwandikalay ('Cobra Safe'). This followed a year of inconclusive fighting which had cost the British eight fatalities and forty-nine wounded. The epicentre of the trouble had centred on CP Kingshill, where the Mercians had suffered grievously in the previous summer. There was perhaps a personal edge to this operation as it was here that Private Daniel Prior was killed by an IED in mid-March, helping a fellow paratrooper climbing down a ladder. It took eight days just to clear fifty odd compounds but only nine IEDs were discovered. This risk aversion was not without justification: five bomb disposal officers had previously been killed or badly injured in this village. The rude fact was that it was taking a large number of resources to sterilise single villages and even after such expenditure, there could be no guarantee that

the insurgents would not return. In the case of Char Coucha, the sacrifice was ultimately rewarded. A Company, 2 RGR took over from the paratroopers and set about consolidating security. Three additional checkpoints were constructed. Over seventy-five families gradually returned and resumed their lives. A road, mosque and temporary school were built or refurbished. Over the course of six months, not a single IED was laid in the vicinity of the village. As impressively, CP Kingshill, the worst single patrol base in Babaji suffered no attacks.

Further south in Shin Kalay, Kharotei tribesmen had once again clashed with their neighbours and blamed 'the Taliban'. The real reason for these clashes probably lay in land disputes exacerbated by the fact that November was the planting season for the opium poppy, but it suited the Kharotei to co-opt British troops into their feuds. In early December, the Royal Irish supported by Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (5 Scots) mounted Operation Tor Kanjak 5 ('Black Thorn') which led to several arrest and separated the warring parties. The villagers enthusiastically identified 'Taliban' to the Afghan police and expressed solidarity with the government when Governor Habibullah held an impromptu shura in the main mosque, as they had done two years previously when Royal Marines first arrived in the settlement. That summer, a Captain John Bethell serving as the intelligence officer with the Welsh Guards wrote a highly perceptive article in the *British Army Review*, describing the complex web of relationships in Shin Kalay.[1029] These were not remote villages. These were 'cleared' communities within shooting range of British patrol bases. In some areas the insurgents were walking straight back in as soon as they had the measure of the British platoon houses in their midst.

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In Sayedabad, which the Lancasters had invested in the previous summer during Operation Tor Shezada ('Black Prince'), the fighting had never stopped. For A Company 1 Royal Irish, this was an opportunity to finally 'close the Nad-e Ali door and lock it'. When the company first deployed to this corner of the district, it had taken responsibility for five patrol bases, with PB Kalang acting as the company HQ location. On the very day of the handover, the Ulstermen discovered they were unable to patrol fifty metres from the patrol base without coming under sustained fire from the locals. This was an area dominated by Baluchis who were determined to resist encroachment by Western soldiers. They appeared to be backed up by Achakzai and Noorzai, the latter heavily implicated in the narcotics trade. Indeed, it subsequently transpired that one of the principal causes of conflict was local fears over the Government Led Eradication (GLE) program. Unlike other parts of

Nad-e Ali, these communities had not been included in the wheat seed distribution and had consequently grown the opium poppy. If, as Taliban propaganda suggested, the British intended to destroy the poppy crop, it would have spelled the ruin of farmers who had already committed to the planting cycle. Over the next three months, A Company set about leaning against the door, as well as reassuring villagers in countless shuras. This determined effort eventually succeeded in advancing the frontline a further kilometre south, adding to the matrix of deterrent patrol bases.

The first major operation mounted by A Company was Tor Kanjak IV, which launched at the end of October in the Sayedabad area. This was, in Major Humphrey's words, an 'armed census' that succeeded in deepening the understanding of local politics. This was followed by a series of operations undertaken between the villages of Sayedabad and Zangal. These succeeded in displacing the local insurgent gangs (as it happened, into the US marine-held area of Marjah). The operations were given the code word Tor Zhemay ('Black Winter') but bleak winter might have been a better choice.

Tor Zhemay turned into a stiff fight that lasted the better part of two months. The company was engaged in 131 gun fights, sustained twenty-two attacks on checkpoints, and discovered twenty-five IEDs.[1030] In the end, fourteen insurgents were killed and a further fifteen were wounded and captured, which temporarily ended violence in the area. Five new check points were constructed (in fact, four were re-builds of check points established by the Lancasters which had been abandoned), and a bridge was built over the Nahr-e Bugra canal. A turning point in the ding-dong battle seemed to be reached when a check point (CP Ranger) was built right in the middle of one of the more troublesome hamlets, Haji Jan Mahmad Kalay. This appeared to convince the truculent locals that it was better to throw in their lot with the British rather than with the insurgents. The logistics involved in these operations should not be underestimated. The poor state of tracks in the area meant that 614 truck-loads of aggregate had to be brought in to make the tracks passable to heavy military vehicles. A huge amount of effort was being expended to advance 1,000 metres. In typical Afghan style, local contractors ripped the British off mercilessly supplying the aggregate. The capstone to the Tor Zhemay operations was the formation of Afghan Local Police (ALP) in the newly-secured villages. Again, in Major Humphrey's words, it was the willingness of local leaders to 'put their heads above the parapet' and take responsibility for security in their own communities that proved decisive. Three rangers lost their lives, and several suffered serious injuries, securing this small corner of Nad-e Ali.

Despite these clearances, the southern flank of the Royal Irish would remain persistently troublesome to the end of the tour. In a final operation (Tora Zhemay VI, 'Courageous Winter', conducted over 26-28 February), the battlegroup mounted the biggest airborne operation undertaken by an Irish regiment since the Second World War, in the area of Zaborabad. Eleven helicopters, including four US marine Sea Stallions, landed A and C Companies, a contingent from 2/8 Marines, and an ANA company in an area known as 'the red desert', from the colour of the soil. On the ground, blocking positions were established by Cyclops Squadron 2 RTR as well as by soldiers from A and C Companies. The heliborne group was dropped on three landing sites appropriately named Carrick, Derry and Belfast, shortly after daybreak. The overwhelming presence of ISAF soldiers scared away the insurgents and there was no fighting. The two day operation was marked by torrential rain and 'cloying mud'. Several arrests were made and fourteen weapon caches were uncovered. As much as anything Tora Zhemay VI demonstrated just how accurate British intelligence had become. A year previously a battalion would have counted uncovering one weapon cache as a successful operation.

The insurgents, as always, bided their time and re-infiltrated when the soldiers left. Just over a week after the conclusion of Tora Zhemay VI they got their revenge when Lance Corporal Stephen McKee was killed after the Jackal he was commanding struck an IED. The force of the blast was such that McKee was flung five metres from the vehicle. He was one of three brothers, a cousin and a father-in-law all serving with the Royal Irish, an illustration of the strength of bonds in this family regiment. In a similar incident involving the Irish Guards in a night move, Major Matthew Collins and Lance Sergeant Mark Burgan were killed by a massive IED that ripped off the front of their Jackal. Miraculously, the rear gunner and an interpreter survived the blast.

Further east, in Lashkar Gah District, ANA and AUP mentored by the Royal Highland Fusiliers (2 Scots) and by the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (5 Scots) were enjoying some successes. Over the course of the winter, Route 601 (the tarmac road leading east out of Lashkar Gah to Highway 1) was temporarily cleared of insurgents in a series of operations. In Operation Zmaray Sarak 8 ('Lion's Road'), ten suspected bomb-makers were arrested along with some poppy farmers (at least this is what the AUP told the Argylls: the suspicion that they were simply lifting petty criminals to impress their mentors could not be discounted). In Bolan Desert, a haul of Russian mines, mortar rounds, artillery shells, and RPG rockets was discovered. This had been the old frontline so it was quite possible that a vacating Russian unit had simply abandoned the lot in the desert. In Operation Zmaray Attal 3 ('Local Hero') a bomb-making factory was uncovered

near Route 601 following a local tip-off. Over the course of Operation Zmaray Thund ('Lion's Needle') another compound used to store IED components was found and destroyed. In the north, the Royal Highland Fusiliers (2 Scots) supported by 2 RTR mounted Operation Oqab Jorawel ('Eagle's Build') clearing insurgents from three villages, Khan Kheyl, Tabilla and Quelp, that adjoined Routes Ayrshire and Trident. It was later reported that violent incidents declined by 90 per cent in the area. Lashkar Gah District had never been a Taliban enclave but the tempo and successes of operations in this area nevertheless seemed to suggest that a corner was being turned in Helmand.

In Babaji, 2 Para had taken over from the Gurkhas. Five companies were deployed across the district: D Company to PB 1, C Company to PB 2, E Company to PB 3, B Company to PB 4, and C Company relieving the Argylls at PB 5. Over the course of the winter these companies gradually expanded the security bubbles around their villages, building more checkpoints and pushing the insurgents south across the river. A typical operation was described by B Company:

'The platoon left PB 4 before first light to conduct a patrol in the north. The aim was to speak to local nationals in order to gather intelligence about insurgent movement in the area. The area had never been patrolled before by 2 PARA and there was a degree of the unknown about how the patrol might unfold.'[1031]

The paratroopers found that the locals were receptive to the soldiers and warned them the Taliban were preparing to attack. The platoon commander ordered his men to take up defensive positions and 'soon after all 3 sections came under simultaneous sustained attack'.

What followed – a stand-off with increasing weights of fire thrown at the insurgents – was essentially little different to the gun fights fought by paratroopers in the summer of 2006. Unable to close with the enemy, the only option was to try to destroy the enemy with high explosives. An Apache and F-18 were duly called to give support. In the meantime, the paratroopers poured fire into suspected insurgent firing points but 'despite the ferocity of our fire the enemy wouldn't let up'. Rather than wait for the aircraft a decision was taken to batter the gunmen with an artillery barrage. This seemed to work as it 'caused the enemy's fire to cease immediately'. The paratroopers proudly reported that 'this was the largest artillery fire mission fired in the last year by a platoon on the ground', seemingly unconcerned that the whole destructive business may have been entirely counter-productive. As so often happened in the past, the insurgent fire only abated temporarily. Gunmen on the flanks began to engage the platoon, so the paratroopers

ordered another artillery barrage and fired off 150 smoke shells to cover their movements. Finally, the great arbiter of the skies – an Apache helicopter – appeared over the fields. Following a couple of strafing runs, 'the enemy was not heard from again'. Hundreds of thousands of pounds of ammunition had been expended in what for the paratroopers had been a morning of high excitement but whether this amounted to 'winning over the population' was questionable.

It would have been unfair, however, to characterise 2 Para's war in Babaji as an exercise in thoughtless violence. For the commanding officer, the paratroopers were more involved in a 'gendarmerie role' than in open confrontation with insurgents. In December, the battlegroup conducted Operation Tor Ghai, followed by a move into the areas of Tajikan and Padaka, in January and February respectively. The former operation successfully cleared a mixed Barakzai, Noorzai, Strano village that had proved particularly troublesome. But much of the time the paratroopers found themselves engaged in the humdrum business of promoting local governance and reconstruction in villages. At Tor Ghai, the Taliban attempted to reverse the opening of a temporary school by sending the teacher threatening night letters. Major French, commanding E Company, took the unusual measure of writing a threatening letter back to the Taliban. It did the trick. The lower levels of violence were reflected in the casualty statistics, although the poignancy of losing soldiers over the Christmas season never lessened. Civilian casualties from IEDs remained high, tipping the locals towards the paratroopers. It came as a surprise to discover that insurgents were fining villagers $1,000 if a child or animal accidentally set of an IED. In these circumstances, many farmers had had enough and backed the Western soldiers.

A New Zealander, Private John Howard, was killed just before Christmas by an F-18 in a fratricide incident. It appeared that in the confusion of battle the pilot mistakenly fired his cannon at the soldiers who were in close contact with the insurgents. Two other paratroopers were injured by shrapnel. The Task Force then suffered a double setback on the last day of the year when two soldiers engaged in a clearance operation triggered IEDs. Both suffered triple amputations but survived. On the same day a patrol escorting a journalist paused for a rest and was caught in a burst of automatic fire. Four soldiers and the journalist were hit. They were all saved from more serious injury by the body armour. A single unhurt private soldier then faced dealing with multiple casualties and co-ordinating the casevac, which he did with exemplary coolness. On New Years' Day, a Private Vatubua serving with the Argylls, as part of the 2 Para battlegroup, was killed by an IED concealed in a wall near the village of Saidabad Kalay.

Also in January, Private Martin Bell was killed disregarding an order to remain still as he tried to render first aid to an injured colleague. For this act of selflessness he would be awarded a posthumous George Medal. In the initial contact a paratrooper had been severely injured by an IED. The blast had spread his equipment in dense vegetation across a wide area. A ten minute search failed to retrieve all the equipment and the search was called off. This order was then overturned. As the soldiers prepared to move again a second soldier set off another IED and was critically injured. Bell stepped in to save this comrade's life and was killed by a third IED. He was the 350th British serviceman to die in Afghanistan. His Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Andy Harrison, made the heartfelt observation that 'no man has greater love than this'. Concern for your comrades cost the life of another soldier – Private Daniel Prior – who moved forward to assist a heavily laden fellow-paratrooper trying to climb down a ladder following a gun battle, triggering an IED. Harrison himself would miraculously survive being struck by an RPG warhead that failed to detonate correctly. By the end of the tour the battalion had suffered six fatalities and seventy-two soldiers had been wounded in action.

Shortly after the tenth anniversary of the war, as Christmas approached, ISAF suffered an unexpected blow with the premature death of Richard Holbrooke from a heart complication (his place was taken in the interim by Frank Ruggiero, later replaced by the veteran diplomat Marc Grossman). Before passing away in a hospital in Washington DC, Holbrooke was visited by grandees of an American establishment bidding farewell not just to their most effective special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, but to a man who had been part of American foreign policy for half a century. Reportedly, his last words as he was wheeled into the operating theatre were, 'You've got to fix Afghanistan'. Holbrooke's star had shone most brightly in the 1990s when he had climbed into the cockpit of gangsters in the Balkans and punched his way to a lasting peace accord. He described Afghanistan as the biggest mess he had seen in his life, which was high flattery from a man who had witnessed the Vietnam War. Just before his death he testified to a Congressional committee on the state of the war. Typically, he sought to highlight the fact that Afghanistan and Pakistan had just signed a transit-trade agreement under US auspices, the first in several decades. It was measures like this, he sought to impress on his interrogators that would determine the success of the war, not bombs and bullets. It was his last and perhaps most valuable bequest to the troubled region.

Holbrooke's untimely loss was followed by that of Mark Sedwill, NATO's senior civilian representative in Afghanistan, who left his post in March after serving a year in

Kabul. Sedwill had succeeded as much as anyone in restoring British credibility in the capital, and was an effective interlocutor with his American counterpart. His immediate replacement was Sir Simon Gass, no stranger to difficult regimes as he was hopping from the hot post of British ambassador to Iran. This was also an interim posting and he in turn was replaced by Sir William Patey.

In the week following Holbrooke's premature death, President Obama delivered a promised annual review of the war. After paying tribute to the deceased special representative, the President spelled out America's mission in Afghanistan, a mission of greatly reduced expectations and limited time frame. 'It is important to remember why we remain in Afghanistan,' he said, 'it's not to defeat every last threat to the security of Afghanistan, because, ultimately, it is Afghans who must secure their country. And it's not nation-building, because it is Afghans who must build their nation. Rather, we are focused on disrupting, dismantling and defeating al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and preventing its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future'.[1032] This was Biden's counter-terrorism war trumping the prospect of an interminable counter-insurgency war. The British Prime Minister, coincidentally on a Christmas frontline visit in Helmand, concurred with the Obama strategy.

As 16 Air Assault Brigade prepared to handover to the commandos, it was clear that the winter of 2011 pointed to some sort of turning point in the war. In this sense, Operation Herrick 13 represented redemption for the paratroopers after the fiasco of Herrick 4 and the frustrations of Herrick 8. The most visible sign of this change was in the casualty statistics – they collapsed significantly, at least in the British-held districts. The brigade suffered the least number of combat deaths from enemy action (eighteen) since 52 Infantry Brigade in the winter of 2007. This was noteworthy as the preceding brigades had been routinely suffering over fifty fatalities. Taliban activity had not abated – in some areas it had increased – but these insurgent foot soldiers amounted to 'spoilers', in the words of the Commanding Officer of the Royal Highland Fusiliers, who were finding it increasingly difficult to derail the ISAF train. The Joint Force Explosive Ordnance Disposal (JFEOD) teams had dealt with over 1,000 IED call-outs of which around one fifth had detonated.[1033] One IED had successfully detonated for every two and a half that had been defused, damaging or destroying thirty-six vehicles and killing twelve soldiers (all riding Jackals). Bomb disposal officers and searchers were continuing to pay a high price: three were killed and seven lost limbs, a tally which included triple amputees. These depressing statistics concealed an undoubted success: as many as four out of ten IEDs

were now being pointed out to British troops by supportive locals. In fact, twice as many IEDs were being identified as were detonating. It could not be denied the British were at last winning the trust of frustrated villagers.

Elsewhere in Helmand, and especially in Sangin, the same miserable story was being played out but this was now a narrative being reported in *USA Today* and not *The Times*. British politicians could breathe a sigh of relief and be privately grateful that at last the British war appeared to be heading in the right direction.

The fall in casualties was real but deceptive in some respects. A large number of soldiers and civilians were still being injured. The Commanding Officer of 207 Field Hospital – a Territorial Army unit – recalled that in the first three weeks of the tour, his doctors and nurses had to deal with nine double amputations, two triple amputations, two quadruple amputations, multiple gunshot wounds, and one unfortunate case involving nine seriously wounded children, one of which died.[1034] In the same period, the Bastion mortuary processed nineteen ISAF soldiers killed in action. Over the course of the tour, 3,800 patients passed though Bastion Hospital, including over 1,000 Afghans. A majority were non-battlefield casualties but this did not diminish the fact that for the medical staffs, the war had not relaxed. Bastion's reputation as the busiest and best trauma hospital in the world was still deserved.

The turnaround in the war was no longer wishful thinking. The annual ABC/BBC/ARD poll clearly showed there had been a rather significant sea change in Helmand by the spring of 2011. Afghans reporting gun fights between Taliban and ISAF had fallen dramatically. Just under half of polled Helmandis reported experiencing this violence – which was too many – but it was also evident that some areas of Helmand had been pacified. This was reflected in the ratings for local security, up from 14 per cent to 67 per cent. Killings by Taliban also witnessed a steep drop, from 81 per cent to 41 per cent. The insurgents were being marginalised both physically and morally. A mini-boom in reconstruction was also finally paying dividends: just 14 per cent of Helmandis had rated economic opportunities positively in the past year. This number now stood at 59 per cent. Three quarters of Helmandis had reported seeing a school, or clinic, or government office being built in their area. Paradoxically, Afghan ingratitude had also soared. More than half of all Helmandis offered that attacking ISAF forces was justifiable. No matter how much gold paved the streets most Pashtuns still, basically, wanted Westerners to leave.

Gold did finally pour into Helmand. Over 2010-11 around $500 million was committed to reconstruction in the province.[1035] About half of this was actually drawn from

American CERP funds – effectively, US marines were leading the rebuilding of Helmand, not civilian government organisations, or NGOs. This perhaps provided the counter-proof to the British doctrinal position that soldiers were incapable of understanding development issues, and could not be trusted with aid money except under tight controls. Another fifth of the funds was provided by USAID and Britain had set up a central 'conflict pool' that contributed around $90 million. Debate over DfID's commitment to Helmand Province had become, to a certain degree, a stale debate. There were over 100 civilians working in the Lashkar Gah PRT, but only seven were DfID staff. The PRT had become a multi-agency organisation recruiting talent from a variety of organisations including ex-servicemen who were not fussed with living in field conditions. DfID was now the third smallest contributor of aid money to Helmand, only above Estonia and Denmark.[1036]

Crucially, the British had managed to open the roads in central Helmand – an old trick which their Victorian forebears had used to pacify the tribes. The most ambitious project – restoring the entire length of Route 601 connecting Lashkar Gah with Gereshk was actually funded by USAID and involved employing a 1,000 strong security force to protect the work gangs. Colonel Gerhard Wheeler served as the Deputy Commander of the British task force for a year and was in a unique position to observe the transformation this caused. When he first arrived in the province he recalled that travelling to a nearby British base required a 'two-day fighting patrol'. Now he could drive the journey 'in just 20 minutes.' As importantly, so could the locals.[1037] This new-found mobility had a catch. Aggregate roads only had a lifespan of about six months. The maintenance of the new roads was neither funded nor sustained by any long term plan. There was not a single, reliable road building contractor in the entire province. Foreigners had built the roads, not Afghans.

Notwithstanding all these challenges, for the first time since the start of the war, there were genuine reasons for optimism. Ironically, after five years of parliamentary reports that mostly painted a rose-tinted view of progress in Helmand, the Foreign Affairs Select Committee chose this moment to publish a severe report questioning the whole basis of Britain's involvement in the province and the strategy being pursued by the government.[1038] The points it made were not invalid – particularly the lack of a credible political resolution to the war – but these were arguments that should have been voiced in 2006. It was as if success had been proclaimed so many times in the past, nobody now believed it possible. The fact was that Britain did now have a long-term strategy in Helmand, in lock-step with the United States, and this was reaping some rewards. At least it could be said

that the British Army was ‘winning its war’, and the changes in the British-held districts could no longer be denied. Whether this could be translated into overall, strategic success remained doubtful. It was revealing that former Defence Secretary Des Browne, questioned by the Defence Select Committee in March, gave this pessimistic answer to the prospects of ultimate British success: ‘We don’t have the resources or the ability to build a settled, governed community in an environment to which we are culturally not sensitive, and where the people of that country have not known governance for 40 years or more and have a life expectancy of about 46’.[1039] Notwithstanding, on 21 March, on the back of this purported progress, President Karzai made the announcement that seven towns and districts would be handed over to Afghan control by the summer, including the British-controlled Lashkar Gah. ‘Transition’ was coming to Afghanistan, and soon.

The Taliban reacted to this announcement with defiance. In Helmand the entire mobile telephone network was shut down following threats of violence against staff. The mischievous Sher Akhundzada exploited this chaos by calling for the head of the Deputy Governor of Helmand, a man called Sattar. Eventually Sattar was sacked, on the grounds of immorality. At a *nowruz* (New Year) pop concert held in Lashkar Gah, unveiled young women had been spotted mingling in the crowd and Sattar was blamed for this affront to Pashtun conservatism. The charge that Lashkar Gah’s youth was being corrupted was baseless, as Sher Akhundzada well knew. This was now a provincial capital that boasted ten internet cafes, over 200 shops selling (immoral) DVDs, a dozen periodicals and radio stations, and satellite TV for those with independent electricity supply. You could pass your time away in a coffee shop or ice cream parlour in ‘Lash Vegas’, as the British soldiers dubbed the town. Modernity had arrived and there was little that the Taliban or anybody else could do to halt the tide of electronic consumerism.

Former Foreign Secretary David Miliband also struck a note of caution amongst all this optimism. In a speech to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology he returned to a theme that he had pressed in the dying days of the last Labour government.[1040] There was no military solution to the war in Afghanistan. Respected institutions like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were describing a deteriorating rather than an improving situation in the country. The Taliban were far from beaten, and had grown in strength. In Miliband’s view, what the war lacked was a civilian equivalent of General Petraeus backed by the authority of the UN Security Council. The argument was persuasive but there were few indications that anyone was prepared to take the initiative on securing a political settlement.

The hand-over to 3 Commando Brigade in Helmand became over-shadowed by the conflict in Libya. There was a painful quality to the Libyan crisis that seemed to highlight all the follies of the past decade. The United States – the only country with the military muscle and intelligence to topple President Gaddafi quickly – had grown weary of involvement in Arab wars. The Obama administration instead backed off, and handed the problem over to the Europeans. In France, a President Sarkozy facing humiliation in imminent elections re-discovered Napoleonic fervour for war-mongering. Strong Sarko was rewarded by a fawning French media that seemed to revel in the display of French military hardware, even if the enemy was the hopeless and helpless Libyan armed forces. Thatcher had benefited from 'the Falklands factor' – why not the French president? A French electorate was less impressed and the ruling UMP was drubbed.[1041] In Britain, the leader of the pack was Foreign Secretary William Hague who displayed Wordsworthian delirium over the spring of Arab revolutions.

The details, as always, were far messier. The soon-to-be decommissioned HMS *Cumberland* was joined by HMS *York* and the two ships managed to evacuate 468 people, including 130 UK nationals from Benghazi.[1042] HMS *Westminster* subsequently took up patrol duties, supported by RAF *Argus*. Three Hercules were dispatched to Valetta, Malta and these aircraft evacuated 464 mainly oil workers including 241 Britons. Some of these flights were shot at, a foretaste of the untrustworthiness of the new-found Libyan allies. In total the creditable British effort, after some initial hiccups, evacuated 1,387 people from Libya, including 507 Britons.

Then the military effort ramped up. Over 800 personnel were sucked into Operation Ellamy – the British part in the UN-imposed no-fly zone over Libya. An early, poorly coordinated, SIS-special forces operation caused a moment of national hilarity, the British never quite losing their taste for a good cock-up. Then, ten Typhoons were deployed to the Italian airbase at Gioia del Colle with great fanfare, the first operational deployment of this aircraft. The truth behind this deployment offered little cause for celebration. Typhoon was deployed because the NATO operation quickly became a three-way squabble between Eurofighter Typhoon, the French Rafale, and the Swedish Gripen. These three aircraft were involved in fighter competitions with billions of revenue at stake (Typhoon lost in all of them). In the case of the Gripen, the Swedish government hastily overturned its historic policy of not deploying combat aircraft overseas when it was realised this might prejudice its hopes of winning the Swiss Air Force bid. The lack of trained pilots (it transpired that there were just forty-eight and only eight qualified to conduct ground attack) meant that

aircrew had to be drawn from two squadrons as well as from the Typhoon conversion and test evaluation pools. A multi-billion dollar, thirty year, pan-European fighter program had yielded just eight pilots – all British to the RAF's credit - that could actually use the aircraft in a meaningful way. More humans have stood on the moon. The shortage of pilots was so acute, the deployment of just ten aircraft meant the RAF was forced to cancel its summer program of display flights. The aircraft themselves had no air-to-ground capability and no sensor pods, so all the pilots could do was circle the now empty Libyan skies (a problem rectified with a software patch that allowed the aircraft to launch Paveway II bombs under guidance from Tornado GR.4). The Royal Navy initially made up for this lack of teeth with three token Tomahawk missiles launched from HMS *Triumph* at targets supplied by American intelligence, and then the boat sailed home. A handful of Tornado GR.4, (also drawn from three squadrons, due to the lack of operational aircraft) popped Brimstone missiles at Libyan tanks but this effort was also initially modest.

The French in the meantime basked in the glory of their aircraft carrier, the *Charles de Gaulle*, in what was becoming a European military chest-thumping competition without clear resolution. Admiral Bernard Rogel would later describe the French Navy as the second-largest in the world and the Royal Navy as 'desperate' – there's one in the eye for Nelson![1043] The *Charles de Gaulle* re-ignited the bitter debate over the decision to scrap Britain's surviving carrier when it emerged that RAF personnel were racking up a £1.2 million monthly hotel bill, which included 100 personnel lodging in the four-star Gran Hotel d'Aragona.[1044] This was hardly 'expeditionary warfare' sniped retired naval officers who pointed out that the RAF-led operation was on course to cost £1 billion over six months, or three times the cost of running a carrier for four years (which proved to be an exaggeration). On the ground, the recklessly enthusiastic 'good rebels' could make no headway against the bottomlessly incompetent forces of 'mad dog Gaddafi', and the civil war seemed to be heading for an unsatisfactory stalemate.

Little had changed since Operation Allied Force in 1999, and the Libyan crisis once again exposed European military debility. In the first week of the NATO-led operation to enforce a no-fly zone, 192 out of 197 Tomahawk missiles had been launched from American platforms (and all had relied on American intelligence); 90 per cent of strike missions had been conducted by American aircraft; 80 per cent of ISTAR missions, 75 per cent of refuel missions and a staggering 100 per cent of electronic warfare missions – all were conducted by American aircraft.[1045] This was Kosovo all over again. Europe's multi-billion dollar boutique air forces were incapable of waging a decisive air war (or

even an especially coherent campaign), without the United States. This unpalatable fact was revealed a year later when a secret Danish air force report was accidentally forwarded to the Danish media organisation *Politiken*. The report confirmed what critics suspected. Without the American umbrella, the Europeans struggled 'to provide reliable intelligence on targets or to conduct bombing raids'.[1046] Coordination was poor and battle damage assessment inadequate. Ironically, the Danish F-16s proved to be one of the better contingents, despite these limitations.

By the end of the first month, around 2,000 sorties had been flown but only half of these were strike missions. The average daily strike sortie rate was hovering at around sixty sorties. NATO claims of targets hit suggested that roughly one in three aircraft was releasing munitions. In Kosovo, the daily strike sortie rate had started at around 150 and ramped up to just under 500 daily strike sorties. In the Gulf Wars, 2,000 daily strike sorties were mounted. Operation Unified Protector was dribbling, not clouting. NATO press conferences routinely replayed cockpit footage of successful strikes but were silent on the misses. The tempo of this now European air war was simply inadequate – it effectively amounted to less than 10 per cent of the sortie rate achieved over the skies of Kosovo and it clearly demonstrated what happened when America's bombers chose to remain in their hangars.

The precipitous military intervention exposed rifts in the cabinet. Michael Gove the Education Secretary reportedly worshipped Mars rather more than Sophia, and was described as positively 'messianic' about going to war.[1047] The Chief of Defence Staff, General Richards joked that membership of the Eton combined cadet force did not qualify as military experience, an unnecessary slight that Cameron seemed to take with good grace. All the while, the sly Fox 'hardly spoke', sniffing perhaps the direction in which this latest British military operation was heading and not wishing - to use the Foreign Secretary's phrase- to be on the wrong side of history.[1048] *Qui tacit consentire* seemed to be the Defence Secretary's motto. With certain metaphorical aptness, the colour blind Fox was in fact provided a battle map by his staffs, with red and green icons. This meant, as he complained, that he could not actually tell who was winning.[1049]

Fox's possible private misgivings proved overblown, but not that much. It took six months to oust Gaddafi at a cost of £300 million.[1050] It was not so much a close run thing as a long, expensive and painfully drawn out thing. Eventually, the arithmetic of destruction, rebel boldness, and the woeful ineptness of the regime forces told. ISAF

conducted 7,500 odd precision strikes but many were against nugatory targets, non-targets, or the same targets. The problem of exaggerated BDA resurfaced again. Journalists visiting targeted barracks discovered 'ample evidence that many tanks had survived airstrikes'.[1051] In one depot, a rebel commander assured the visitors that he had personally counted 470 surviving tanks. This was not the message the NATO media machine had spun with its daily list of destroyed targets. Paradoxically, Operation Ellamy proved a redemptive experience for the RAF. The modest contribution of one squadron contributed around 15 per cent of all strikes (870 when Gaddafi fled), but 90 per cent of the dynamic strikes. Some 230 Brimstone missiles were launched, supplemented by eighty Storm Shadow and Tomahawk. The five Apaches deployed on HMS *Ocean* launched ninety-nine AGM-114 Hellfire missiles. Over 700 targets were struck. This would have been quite impossible ten years previously. A decade of continuous operations had finally resulted in RAF Tornado aircraft equipped with appropriate targeting pods, communications suites, and weapons to conduct a modern air war. The media seemed to miss this vital point and instead fell back on the customary and wholly spurious story of the SAS seeing off the mad fellow.

Echoing the Blairite habit of making triumphant tours of war zones (but remembering to keep his tie on), Cameron made a lightning visit to 'free Tripoli' with Nicolas Sarkozy in mid-September. The two leaders visited a hospital and were met with genuine enthusiasm by cheering Libyans. The chosen location for the photo-opportunity had a certain irony. The week before, the new health minister of the National Transitional Council had assessed that as many as 30,000 Libyans had been killed in the fighting – or many more Libyans, surely, than would have been killed if Gaddafi had been allowed to commit his purported 'massacre of the Libyan people' that sparked the intervention in the first place (this number was actually significantly exaggerated). The fact was that there had been many periods of unrest in the past and none had resulted in massacres of Libyans, just the usual repression. The Egyptian government had shot or imprisoned more protestors. Several hundred homes and businesses had been damaged or destroyed and hundreds of thousands of migrant workers had lost their jobs. Libya's African black population, the ritual victims of Arab racism, were now living in fear of their lives. Reports of torture and summary executions by anti-Gaddafi forces began to surface. Videos were posted on the internet showing decapitations. One unfortunate black was hung upside down in front a baying crowd, tortured and finally had his throat slit, like a goat.[1052] Parts of the country were wrecked. When Gaddafi was finally found, hiding in a culvert in Sirte, an excited mob shot him in the stomach, shoved a metal bar up his rectum,

and finally executed him with a bullet to the head. The pathetic images of the sixty-nine year old half-stripped and bloodied man, pleading with his tormentors, flashed around the world. That this is a traditional finale to revolutions did not make the viewing any more palatable. In deference to the tradition of revolutions, the man who discovered him, Omran Shaaban, did not long outlive Gaddafi. The following autumn, Shaaban was shot in the spine by Gaddafi loyalists and died twelve days later in a Paris hospital. His death coincided with another round of fighting between militias and regime supporters in the town of Bani Walid. Within three years Libya had fragmented into an intractable war between these various militias. There was no dispute that Libya was better off with the Gaddafi family evicted, but it was also evident that Western intervention in a Muslim country had made matters far worse not better.

3 Commando Brigade formally assumed command of the task force on 9 April 2011. The brigade was commanded by Ed Davis who, like his predecessor Brigadier Gordon Messenger, was now on his second tour of Afghanistan. The Royal Marines had been the first British troops to set foot in Afghanistan in the winter of 2001. Since 2006, because of the shortage of infantry battalions, there had been a near continuous presence of commandos in the province. This was the brigade's third full tour, as a brigade, in four years. For Davis, the war in Afghanistan had changed. The phrase 'Afghan good enough' began to creep into literature. It meant that ISAF's time was now finite and it signalled resignation that a return to 'Afghan ways' was inevitable. This was not cause for a wake:

'Embracing this reality will require both military and civilian colleagues to accept… that for all our human terrain analysis, the influence we can bring to bear is limited…they will find their own way to delivering for themselves and their people…If we fail to grasp this and fail to work with the grain of Afghan society in Central Helmand, we risk not only becoming irrelevant, but also having the Afghans 'pull the wool over our eyes'…'[1053]

Working with the grain of Afghan society had been the very message General David Richards had proselytised in the summer of 2006. Brigadier Jerry Thomas had argued the same point in the winter of that year. Somehow, in the intervening years, the message had got lost. Davis also clearly saw, perhaps with the benefit of past mistakes, 'how naïve we were being applying western, idealistic notions to our model of society'. In this he was reflecting the deflation of what had become a fashionable 'shift-shade' model of Afghan society based on four, simplistic constituent parts: government supporters, the tribes, criminals, and insurgents. According to the theory, ISAF's task was to shift the red colour

of insurgents across the spectrum towards the virtuous white colour of government supporters. As Davis and others realised, Afghans simply did not fit into these boxes – they spanned all four in constantly shifting survival strategies.

45 Commando, led by Lieutenant Colonel Oliver Lee (also on his second tour) assumed control of Nad-e Ali from the Royal Irish. 3 Para in the Chah-e Anjir Triangle was replaced by 42 Commando, led by Lieutenant Colonel Ewen Murchison. Further east, 1 Rifles assumed responsibility of Babaji from 2 Para. This battalion was commanded by a former SAS officer, Lieutenant Colonel James de Labillière (unrelated to the famous General de la Billière). This battlegroup was augmented by forty-three Territorial Army volunteers from 6 Rifles, Kilo Company from 42 Commando and A (Amboor) Company from 2 Royal Gurkha Rifles (2 RGR).

In Lashkar Gah there was a straight handover between two Scottish battalions with the Royal Highland Fusiliers (2 Scots) passing the baton to the Highlanders (4 Scots) commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Alastair Aitken. 9/12 Lancers provided the cavalry regiment, taking over from 2 RTR. In a sign of the changing role of the task force, perhaps the most important tasks now fell to Lieutenant Colonel Fraser Rea (2 RGR) who was responsible for the Police Mentoring and Advisory Group at the renamed Regional Training Centre (South West), and Lieutenant Colonel Giles Woodhouse, commanding 3 Mercians (Staffords) who was charged with training the ANA in the Brigade Advisory Group, supported by the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards (Scots DG). The former regiment deployed A and C Companies in the light role under Danish command, in Rahim and Khar Nikah Kalays respectively. B Company assumed the role of the Warrior Company. The Gurkhas were also required to detach a B Company to man six checkpoints on the Nahr-e Bugra canal facing the troublesome *dahste* to the west.

The newly established 30 Commando also deployed with the brigade. This had roots in the Information Exploitation (IX) Group – a successful idea which had been developed in previous deployments. 30 Commando and its predecessor organisations was one of the successes of the war. By the end of the tour, this unit, working intimately with the Brigade Reconnaissance Force, accounted for over half of all detained insurgents and four fifths of all seizures of homemade explosives (over six tonnes or enough to make 900 IEDs, a measure of the industrial output of these devices across Helmand). Some 4 million Pakistani rupees were seized and £2 million's worth of opium impounded. The number of caches uncovered leapt by 140 per cent compared to the previous brigade, and four out of five operations led either to a find or an arrest.[1054] This was a stunning return rate and it

signalled that 3 Commando Brigade had truly mastered fusing and acting on intelligence with alacrity. The intelligence was also precise: some 60 per cent of insurgents detained by the Brigade Reconnaissance Force remained in custody, a success rate that exceeded that of all other units in Task Force Helmand.[1055]

A third possible training task was also now beginning to emerge with the development of the Afghan Local Police (ALP), essentially village militias that, it was hoped, were untarnished by the brush of corruption of the AUP. The ALP program was established by presidential decree in August 2010. An officer who witnessed the birth of the fledgling ALP in south Nad-e Ali described them thus:

'Potential recruits are nominated by village elders before being security vetted, biometrically enrolled, drugs tested and registered by the Ministry of Interior (MOI) in exactly the same way as the ANP. Once registered they swear an oath of allegiance to GIRoA and are paid and equipped by the MOI, receiving 60% of the ANP wage.'[1056]

In fact, in the usual way, the ALP was the latest in a series of similar initiatives, no sooner conceived than changed by the next Westerner arriving in Afghanistan on a short tour, carrying a knapsack of good ideas. These included the Community-Based Security Solutions (CBSS) program; the Critical Infrastructure Protection (CIP) program; the Intermediate Security for Critical Infrastructure (ISCI) scheme; the Afghan Public Protection Program (AP3), and Local Security Forces (LSF) scheme. All had collapsed – would the ALP fare any better?

Initial recruitment was tentative with villagers hedging their bets between the insurgency and ISAF. But once the first recruits were processed a snowball effect began to develop. Money was a motivation, but equally, many villages were frankly fed up with the Taliban and welcomed a chance to see them off. By June 2011, following an operation to clear Zaborabad, as many as 180 ALP volunteers were now operating in south Nad-e Ali. By the beginning of the following year there would be about 200, drawn from eight settlements and manning twenty-five check points – the numbers, at least in Helmand, were always very modest.[1057]

Volunteer policemen were paid a monthly salary of $150 and village leaders received $5,000 to buy weapons. Those who feared a stampede of young Afghans keen to make a quick buck and even more violence seemed to be proved right. In some villages the ALP replaced one group of gun-toting youths with another. At Loy Bagh, B Company, 2 RGR could not help but notice that the twenty-seven volunteers who presented themselves for

service were all members of one family. It was not long before Human Rights Watch was publishing reports itemizing rapes, kidnappings and illegal taxations.[1058] This was one unfortunate side to the ALP. The experience of some British mentoring units suggested that in some areas local volunteer policemen in fact had a real and positive impact on the security of villages. As in so many other instances, it all depended on personalities and local dynamics. There appears to be strong evidence that one of the reasons underlying the successful pacification of Nad-e Ali from 2011 was the manner in which village 'Taliban' switched sides and decided to become better paid ALP instead.[1059] The gunman who yesterday was shooting at British soldiers, now patrolled alongside him, the perfect ally. Perversely, the real winner was the great survivor Abdul Rahman Jan who quickly assumed control of these Nad-e Ali militias. The British had sacked him and now, ironically, he was keeping the peace for the British, as well as protecting his opium crop.

Perhaps the real story behind the ALP was the manner in which ISAF was prepared to clutch at straws, disregarding a history of disappointments and failures with previous attempts to raise local police forces. The fact that an American general was prepared to describe the ALP as a 'potential game changer' in testimony to the House Armed Services Committee suggested a unique desperation.[1060] This was the spokesman of a country that had spent over $550 billion in a high-tech war now suggesting that an illiterate villager armed with a rifle might provide the answer. A British officer tasked with training ALP perhaps expressed the problem with greater honesty: '…imagine taking a group of young, ill-educated, unemployed young men in the UK, giving them three weeks training, a gun, and positing them into a CP, what do you think would happen?'[1061]

Perhaps the most fascinating (and unwelcome) aspect of the ALP was that it acted as a conduit for that most Afghan trait: revenge-taking between villages and communities. By the time of withdrawal in 2014, some 30,000 ALP had been raised (although this figure is suspect and many villages were probably claiming for ghost policemen). The problem of attrition and desertion that bedevilled the remainder of the ANSF was absent in the ALP. The very opposite was happening. Following high-casualty insurgent attacks, there would typically be a rush of young men seeking to join the ALP – to take revenge on the perpetrators, almost certainly known to them.[1062]

The laydown of forces inherited by the marines would contract by the summer (with the handover of Lashkar Gah) which was welcomed as British troops were still scattered across 120 separate FOBs, patrol bases and checkpoints, some only held by sections with

ANA support. The outgoing brigadier had emphasised four themes: the continuing erosion of the insurgency, better governance, improved Afghan security forces, and reconstruction. 3 Commando Brigade would reinforce these themes and seek to push Taliban gangs still further away from central Helmand.

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The question of good governance remained vexed. In many ways the British were repeating the American experience of the 1950-60s. Power was perforce becoming centralised in a handful of Afghans the British could trust - Governor Mangal and his inner circle of personal appointees. This power was growing at the expense of the formal provincial line ministries and other administrative bodies the British were attempting to establish. Mangal was an effective governor who was instrumental to saving the British cause, but he was not immune to Afghan practices. Setting aside the relentless negative propaganda spewed by his enemies, it appears that Mangal was complicit in a number of dubious land deals.[1063] He later became known as 'media Mangal' for the manner in which he manipulated the press. On one occasion he reportedly threw a $40,000 bung at a television channel to stop it broadcasting negative news – funds presumably drawn from the British-provided 'governance line of development', in DfID-speak. On another occasion, he was allegedly paid $1 million from a US fund, moneys which were transferred to a Kuwaiti bank account. Ultimately, Mangal knew the British and Americans were acutely dependent on his survival: this card proved an ace.

At the district level – the level that interacted on a daily basis with villagers - there were few competent or even literate staff, and not a few were corrupt opportunists. Funding also remained a problem. The fledgling provincial and district governments would only become self-sustaining if regular and meaningful flows of money passed from the ministries in Kabul, to line ministry representatives in Lashkar Gah, through the Governor, and finally to the district governors. This was not happening. The whole edifice still depended on the largesse of ISAF and especially on the large sums of money being pumped into the province by the US Marine Corps and USAID. This addiction had to be cured, or the whole experiment would collapse with the withdrawal of American forces.

The challenge of the narco-economy also remained unanswered. According to UNODC almost 140,000 Helmandi households had cultivated the illicit crop in the previous year – or put another way, roughly half of all of Helmand's farmers were in cahoots with the Taliban. For around a sixth, the opium poppy remained the main crop. Around eight tons of opium had been seized that year, a token amount as the estimated total production was

close to 2,000 tons. Around 70,000 hectares in Helmand were set aside for the cultivation of the opium poppy, a marginal decrease on the previous year but this was largely irrelevant as the farm gate price of dry opium had leapt 217 per cent to $254 per kilogram. In fact, the price of opium was now back at the levels it enjoyed when the British first arrived in the province in 2006. If peace was descending in some parts of the British-held province, it was a 'criminalised peace' and at the heart of this criminality was the opium poppy.[1064] Even at the spectacular height of the cocaine trade in Colombia, this drug only accounted for around two per cent of the South American country's GDP. In Afghanistan, opium still accounted for about a quarter of the country's GDP despite the growth in the licit economy. In Helmand, the dependence was even higher.

3 Commando Brigade's tour started with a tragic setback. Just ten days after the handover, Captain Lisa Head, a bomb disposal officer serving with 11 Explosive Ordnance Regiment was killed attempting to defuse an IED in an alleyway. Captain Head had been unlucky. One IED had been found and a second had detonated without causing injuries. A third undetected bomb killed her. She was the second servicewoman killed in action in Helmand. Lisa Head was only twenty-nine when she died but this was already her third operational tour. The rate of operational tours was proving unrelenting for Britain's down-sized army. Five days later, there was a second setback when 488 prisoners escaped from Sarposa Prison in Kandahar. This prison had already witnessed a mass jailbreak in 2008 when almost 1,000 prisoners fled following a carefully co-ordinated attack on the prison. On this occasion the escape was equally audacious – a 320 metre tunnel was dug over five months from a set of compound buildings south of the prison. The tunnel ran under a major road and even including lighting and cooling. The escape of so many Taliban commanders at the start of the fighting season did not augur well for ISAF, although the impact on the frontline following the 2008 jailbreak had not been significant.

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At the end of April, at the height of the poppy harvest, President Obama made the expected announcement that General Petraeus would quit his post in Afghanistan to take up the appointment of head of the CIA. His replacement would be General John Allen who had no experience in Afghanistan but who had served under Petraeus in Iraq from 2006-2008. In a parallel move, Robert Gates the Defense Secretary would be replaced by Leon Panetta. These changes marked an important watershed. For eight years David Petraeus had towered over America's Middle Eastern wars, first as a divisional commander and author of the most influential military doctrine in a generation, and later

as a successful corps commander who oversaw the surge in Iraq. He was subsequently appointed Commander CENTCOM and ended his military career steering ISAF's surge over 2010-2011. Like McChrystal, he believed the war was winnable, but he held out this hope against the background of a White House that no longer believed in winning an intractable counter-insurgency in Afghanistan. President Obama was surely right in this stance, and Petraeus mistaken. It is the unfortunate fate of some generals to become embroiled in wars that are not worth the sacrifice. Driven to succeed, they, like Abraham, are prepared to sacrifice their own son on the altar of war. Obama played God and stayed his hand. In many respects, Petraeus was the modern incarnation of that other great airborne general, Maxwell Taylor. America has produced many such great statesmen generals. None have been perfect but all were special. David Petraeus - soldier, diplomat, politician, thinker, public servant – deservedly joined this elite club.

In Britain, the country was recovering from a double bank holiday and the revelries that followed the marriage of Prince William to his long-term girlfriend Catherine Middleton, when the most unexpected news began to stream from breakfast television channels. Osama bin Laden was dead, killed by American special forces in a raid north of Islamabad. It had taken 3,159 days to track down the fugitive but America had got her man. It seemed strangely fitting that the news broke on a day of swept blue skies not unlike that terrible morning on September 11. In America, and especially in New York, scenes of euphoria were witnessed as crowds poured onto the streets to celebrate the death of the bogeyman.

Bin Laden had been found living at Number 254, 16 Street, Bilad Town, a quiet suburb in the small garrison town of Abbottabad.[1065] The original camp had been founded by a British Army officer, James Abbot, who clearly had an eye for picturesque landscapes. As befitted his style, bin Laden occupied a three storey but plain villa surrounded by high walls and tranquil views. He seems to have spent the last five years of his life in this secluded house, in a sort of Islamic Garden of Eden surrounded by as many as four women, thirteen children and a menagerie of animals. The Pakistani Army officer training academy was less than a mile away and the suburb was the home of serving and retired army officers. Bin Laden's villa was the largest in the area immediately raising the question why nobody had apparently sought to establish who occupied the prominent building.

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Operation Neptune Spear was conducted by the US Navy SEAL Team 6, a well-

practised detachment that had mounted similar missions in Afghanistan. In an echo of the Desert One fiasco, it almost all went horribly wrong when one of the Blackhawk stealth helicopters carrying the assault groups stalled and crashed against a wall.[1066] The luck that had deserted one Democrat president smiled on Obama. The loud explosions woke up the neighbourhood (one local Tweeter giving real time accounts of the activities of the mysterious 'helicopter/UFO' to an unsuspecting audience). The United States had not informed the Pakistani government of the raid, fearing compromise, and the Pakistani reaction on the ground was slow. The assault team from Razor 1 abseiled down and quickly cornered bin Laden in his bedroom with his wife.[1067] Ninety seconds after the sailors landed and shortly after midnight on 2 May, Osama bin Laden was reportedly killed by a bullet that passed above his left eye. He was also shot in the chest. Later, a tiff would grow between two of the SEALs involved in the raid - Robert O'Neill and Mark Bissonnette – over who had actually killed bin Laden. This somewhat distracted from the question why it had been necessary to kill the evidently confused fifty-four year old. One of his wives was wounded in the leg. At first it was claimed she was used as a human shield and that bin Laden had fired at the assaulting group, but this version of events seemed doubtful. From the bloody mess in the bedroom it appeared more likely there was panic and confusion in the darkness. A subsequent corrected version of events described his wife rushing one of the sailors at the doorway. A twelve year old daughter reportedly may have witnessed his death. It appears the fatally wounded bin Laden was lying on the floor convulsing when he was finished off.[1068] Five minutes appeared to elapse between the first confirmed sighting of bin Laden and his death, reported with the words: 'For God and Country, Geronimo, Geronimo, Geronimo'. Bin Laden had died unarmed, although there was an AK-47 and a pistol in the bedroom. Just twelve shots were fired in the entire raid. Within twenty-four hours, bin Laden's body was transferred to the USS *Carl Vinson* and given an Islamic burial at sea. Thus did the world's most wanted terrorist vanish forever in the turquoise waters of the Arabian Sea.

Bin Laden's downfall appeared to have resulted from the confessions of a Guantanamo Bay detainee Abu Faraj al-Libi, a Libyan with a seemingly unquenchable enthusiasm for jihad who gave away the name of one of bin Laden's couriers. This was the Pakistani-born Kuwaiti Abu Ahmed, who also went by the name al-Kuwaiti. In 2003, al-Libi had moved his family to Abbottabad, which provided another clue. A second al-Qaeda detainee, Ahmed Siddiqui, had also mentioned Abbottabad as a possible hiding place for bin Laden. This coincidence, and numerous other intelligence threads, eventually led the CIA to the

mysterious villa where bin Laden was hiding. The painstaking detective work of several years then began to gather momentum in the autumn of 2010. Even at the eleventh hour, the CIA was unsure whether the occupant of the villa was indeed bin Laden. President Obama's decision to risk the raid was rightly later described as one of the 'gutsiest' calls made by a president in recent times. In the immediate aftermath, SEAL Team 6 became comic book heroes but perhaps the real heroes were the anonymous intelligence analysts who never gave up and whose meticulous study finally paid off.

As more details of the raid emerged, questions began to be raised. How could the Pakistani authorities not have known of his whereabouts given that he was living in the middle of a military cantonment? It subsequently transpired that a mobile telephone recovered from the compound included numbers linked to the militant group *Harakat al-Mujahidin*, which in turn was linked with telephone numbers associated with the ISI.

Had the sailors intended to capture bin Laden, or was the mission only ever likely to have had one outcome? Who were the mysterious proprietors of the property, Arshadand Tariq Khan, who claimed to have been fleeing a family feud in Peshawar? What to make of Hamid Gul, the former head of the ISI at the time when bin Laden disappeared in Pakistan, who huffily protested that Pakistan had sold her soul to the United States? Or of the tens of thousands of messages posted across the Arab world lamenting the death of the martyr 'Sheikh Osama'? What intelligence had the American authorities uncovered in the treasure trove of material seized by the sailors at the villa? For the lucky residents of sleepy Abbottabad the celebrity death spurred talk of lucrative tours to the site. By the Wednesday morning, the T-shirt was already on sale and street vendors had set up their stalls on the dust track leading to the green metal doors of bin Laden's house. In a coincidental twist, bin Laden was killed on the 50th anniversary of America's entry into the Vietnam War.

The death of bin Laden had huge symbolic significance. Al-Qaeda had lost its figurehead and inspiration. For Americans, justice had been done. In other respects, the significance of this event was less important. By the time he was finally killed, the march of history had begun to leave behind the white bearded man living in Abbottabad. The turmoil in the Arab world and calls for democracy marginalised al-Qaeda, although these developments greatly excited bin Laden as a transformational *hadath ha'il* ('formidable event'). Seventeen declassified letters later released by the Department of Defense revealed an isolated figure with no real control over any of the so-called al-Qaeda affiliates. One his deepest concerns, which appeared to consume his thoughts, was the

manner in which Muslims were slaughtering Muslims. A bin Laden niece had posed half naked in a Western glamour magazine – the true measure of how far Osama had drifted from a changed world.

His death rather than capture left a huge hole in the historical record. One of the chief witnesses of the events of September 11 was now mute. With the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri still at large, the world was left with the incarcerated and unreliable Khaled Sheikh Mohammed as keeper of the only substantial version of the September 11 plot. Bin Laden's death had no immediate impact on the war in Afghanistan which had long mutated into a Pashtun narco-nationalist war. Across the Arab world, from Yemen to North Africa, al-Qaeda-inspired groups had been incubated and in some of these countries, they were flourishing. The spiritual head might have been decapitated but acolytes were still filled with jihadist ardour. Threats of vengeance were now in the air. An American talk show host joked that everyone in al-Qaeda had just got a promotion, but there was an unintended grim flip side to the joke.

In Britain, the by now habitual exaggeration of Islamist terrorism enjoyed a brief injection of life. A meeting of COBRA was convened on Bank Holiday Monday, ruining a few ministers' holidays. Five Bangladeshis touring Cumbria were arrested as potential terrorists scouting the nuclear power plant at Sellafield. Sniffer dogs enjoyed another day out at on the London Underground and fed-up passengers were urged to report 'anything suspicious'. In fact, over this period, the majority cause of fatalities on the London Underground was the traditional one – Londoners throwing themselves under trains. By 2010, possibly exacerbated by the economic crisis, eighty Londoners every year were committing suicide in this manner.[1069] The worst affected line was the miserable Northern Line that suffered 145 suicide attempts in ten years. If the intention was to keep Londoners safe, then the British Transport Police would have done well mounting anti-suicide patrols, but not patrols to catch suicide terrorists who were causing no deaths on the London Underground. By the end of the month the excitement had passed, replaced by anticipation over the European Cup Final between Manchester United and FC Barcelona at Wembley Stadium (won by the Catalans, inspired by their talismanic Argentine striker Leo Messi).

In one important respect, the death of bin Laden did have profound consequences on the war in Afghanistan. The passing of this bogeyman marked a psychological watershed that no American legislator could ignore. By coincidence, the US Congress had scheduled an intensive session of testimonies from Afghanistan experts to answer the question: what

is the end state in Afghanistan and how do we get there? Virtually every interlocutor delivered the same message – it is time to unwind the massive commitment and get out. Or in the American vernacular, to liquidate the war.

Perhaps the strongest testimony came from Richard Haass, given on the day after bin Laden's slaying when a certain triumphalism might have been expected. Haass offered the very opposite message:

'Much of the debate about Afghanistan has focused on whether U.S. policy is likely to succeed…I am deeply sceptical that this policy will work given the nature of Afghanistan… and the reality that Pakistan will continue to provide a sanctuary for the Taliban. Yes, U.S. forces will succeed at clearing and holding, but successful building by the end of 2014 is a long shot at best. Some Taliban may give up but many and probably most will not. Afghan military and police forces will increase in number and improve in performance but not nearly as much as is needed…the bigger question hovering over current U.S. Afghan policy is whether it is worth it even if it were to succeed. I would argue it is not, both on the micro (local) level and the macro (global) level.'[1070]

There was also another factor that nobody could ignore. America's tense relations with Pakistan had taken yet another turn for the worse. In both countries there were calls for retrenchment and withdrawal. Fears that Pakistan might take revenge by offering China the tail plane of the crashed stealth Black Hawk were somewhat overtaken by the speed of response of the model world. By the end of May, the Hong Kong based Dragon Models was already offering a 1/144 scale model of the *Operation Geronimo* helicopter down to the finest detail.[1071] The secret was out, at least in the bedrooms of hundreds of excited children across the world.

In Afghanistan, on 1 May, the Taliban ruling council announced their traditional spring offensive ('Badar', after the battle fought by the Prophet Mohammed at Mecca). In well-translated English, suggesting Pakistani assistance, the offensive promised to target 'foreign invading forces, members of their spy networks and (other) spies, high-ranking officials of the Kabul Puppet Administration, both military and civilian, members of the cabinet, members of the parliament, Heads of foreign and local companies working for the enemy and contractors'. The offensive would witness 'group and martyrdom seeking attacks', 'city attacks', ambushes, and IED attacks. Within the week, urban attacks were launched in Kabul, Taloqan and Herat. In Takhar a suicide bomber killed the senior Afghan policeman in northern Afghanistan, General Mohammed Daus Daud, and injured the German Major General Markus Kneip, the most senior ISAF officer caught in an

insurgent attack since the beginning of the war. In Helmand the offensive started late due to the delayed poppy harvest. On 19 May the truce seemed to come to end with forty gun fights recorded across the British-held districts and 163 across the province. Camp Bastion experienced a rare rocket attack and mortars were fired at the Lashkar Gah PRT killing an Afghan woman. An IED at Lashkar Gah's bus station caused a number of injuries to locals and a helicopter transiting over Gereshk had to dodge an RPG rocket – the fighting season was on.

Even as the Taliban began their spring offensive, relations between President Karzai and ISAF deteriorated dramatically. In April, Karzai made a speech in which he declared that all PRTs should closed down. There were twenty-eight PRTs in Afghanistan and they were effectively acting as a parallel government through which Western aid was siphoned directly to provincial and district governors, bypassing the corrupt ministries in Kabul. Karzai's call to shut down the PRTs was unrealistic. Without a robust and honest civil service extending from government to district level, ISAF donors had little choice but to rely on the mechanism of their own PRTs to ensure the most efficient disbursement of aid. Many still viewed the prospect of diverting this aid through a government official in Kabul as a complete anathema. The 'capacity building' that organisations like DfID had engaged in since 2002 had not yielded a functioning central government – it had yielded a pyramid scheme of fraud, embezzlement and corruption.

The second point of friction was the perennial sore of air strikes. At the end of May an American air strike in Now Zad resulted in the deaths of around a dozen women and children. The corpses were transported to Governor Mangal's office in Lashkar Gah (not least to ensure compensation payments), and the event received wide publicity. In a rare outing, Karzai visited Helmand and later condemned the airstrike on national television, describing ISAF as 'invaders' – a highly emotive word whose significance no Afghan would have missed. This was highly inflammatory. He went further declaring that he would prohibit all air strikes against dwellings. This was a stricture he could not enforce, and which ISAF was not prepared to obey as it would turn every compound from Helmand to Kunduz into an invulnerable and inviolable fort for insurgents (in fact, the British did change their Rules of Engagement accordingly, but not the Americans). By raising the stakes Karzai was playing to a domestic audience, but badly eroding the goodwill of Western countries propping up his regime.

Relations with the Afghan security forces had also worsened, particularly with American forces. Since the end of 2009 there had been seventeen murder attempts against

ISAF servicemen resulting in thirty-two deaths and as many injured. Afghan policemen or soldiers were now accounting for 3.5 per cent of all ISAF fatalities, or one ISAF soldier was being murdered every seventeen days.[1072] In the last four months the ratio had climbed to one ISAF soldier murdered every nine days. In a number of cases it was evident that fellow Afghans had allowed the perpetrator to escape, further souring relations. ISAF would describe these incidents as rare and the actions of rogue personnel but there was ample evidence that the root problem was a cultural clash between Afghans and their mentors whom they perceived as arrogant, too quick to engage in destruction, and disrespectful of Afghan customs. As one Afghan soldier put it: 'They always shout and yell 'Mother Fucker'! They are crazy'.[1073]

For 3 Commando Brigade the principal task was clearing the remaining 'ungoverned spaces' in Babaji. Much of the trouble in the district stemmed from the fact that the British had unwittingly backed the Barakzai over the minority tribes on the fringes of Babaji.[1074] In one of 2 Para's last operations (Operation Omid Shash, 'Hope Six')) a 1,000 strong battlegroup including 750 ANA commanded by General Sherin Shah, had swept into the villages of Malgir and Kopak, in the north-east corner of the district, meeting little resistance. The operation had lasted two days and the forces had subsequently withdrawn. The marines would repeat the process but now establish a permanent presence in the villages. Simultaneously, the abandoned village of Loy Mandeh would be tackled, a settlement that had already cost the life of Marine Nigel Mead and which was known to be heavily seeded with IEDs. The three objectives were given the codenames Gold, Silver and Bronze.

The operation was called Omid Haft ('Hope Seven') and it involved most of 42 Commando and a contingent from 1 Rifles. These were supported by A and B Companies from the Highlanders (4 Scots); D Squadron from the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards (Scots DG) mounted on Warthogs; 9/12 Lancers from the Brigade Reconnaissance Force operating on Jackals; and Yankee Company from 30 Commando Information Exploitation Group.[1075] The ANA element was provided by 6th Battalion from 3/215 Brigade. A total of twenty-two aircraft were involved ferrying troops or providing air cover and surveillance, an airborne operation that coincided with poor weather.

The operation began on 24 May with the insertion of Juliet Company south of Loy Mandeh. Lima Company was deployed to the east of the village. Loy Mandeh was an area of broken and partly uncultivated land that had largely been abandoned because of the fighting. Many tracks were seeded with IEDs and the local insurgents were expected to

put up resistance. Juliet Company became involved in heavy gun fights to the west of the village and it took forty-eight hours for the two companies to flush insurgents from the countryside surrounding the village. On the third day, a Juliet Company patrol searching an abandoned compound set off a large IED. The patrol had been involved in heavy fighting and sought shade in an abandoned compound in an area where another soldier had been killed in the previous tour. This knowledge and the fact that the compound was a well-known Taliban firing point, likely to be seeded with IEDs, should perhaps have alerted the marines. Lieutenant Oliver Augustin and Marine Samuel Alexander were killed in the blast and several more marines were injured. This was Alexander's second operational tour in as many years; in his first tour he had been awarded a Military Cross. He left behind a widow and one year old son. The IED attack seemed to initiate an ambush and the marines became engaged in a gun fight that lasted several hours, even as they struggled to evacuate their dead and injured colleagues. Eventually the pressure from the two companies told and Loy Mandeh was declared clear. The honour of taking down the white flag of the Taliban was given to a Major Rahim Ali who duly hoisted the Afghan national flag over the village, five days after the start of the operation. Two checkpoints would be built to secure the area and deter insurgent re-infiltration.

While the marines fought to clear Loy Mandeh, in the early hours of 26 May and still beset by poor weather, a 300 strong force of 1 Rifles and 6th Battalion 3/215 ANA mounted a heliborne assault in the areas of Malgir and Kopak villages. Yankee Company acted as a screen. Twelve helicopters were involved, dropping the soldiers at five separate locations near Objective Gold. The assault was supported by 29 Commando Regiment, Royal Artillery who fired illumination rounds to assist the helicopter crews struggling with the low light conditions. In coordination with the heliborne deployment, a second 200 strong force secured crossing points over the Nahr-e Bugra canal at Objectives Silver and Bronze. This action was undertaken by two ANA Tolays drawn from 3/215 Brigade supported by mentors. Fifty tons of stores were subsequently dropped by USMC helicopters on the five helicopter landing sites in the vicinity of Gold. Unlike the marines further south, 1 Rifles at first met virtually no resistance and by the end of the first day the foundations of five checkpoints had been established. On the second day, A Company was locked in 'a running battle between the Company and the insurgents lasting from early morning until after dark'.[1076] To break the deadlock, mortars, Apache and strike aircraft were called against the insurgents who proved very difficult to spot in the lush vegetation. That night the insurgents got their revenge by opening sluice gates and flooding the field in which the soldiers had leaguered. When the Chinooks arrived to extract the riflemen,

one of shortest men in the company, an unfortunate Lance Corporal Ingram, was up to his chin in water.

To ensure the sustainability of the new checkpoints, a massive engineer effort was undertaken. Sappers from 31 Armoured Engineer Squadron cleared the main route connecting the checkpoints to the spine of Babaji (Route Neptune); other sappers from 39 Armoured Engineer Squadron followed behind upgrading the route; and a third engineer detachment built a forty-four metre temporary General Support Bridge over the Nahr-e Bugra canal. This allowed the re-supply of sixty tonnes of supplies carried by the Close Support Logistic Regiment (CSLR). Eventually, the General Support Bridge was replaced by a second permanent bridge; the longest built by the British Army in Helmand. This construction took 39 Armoured Engineer Squadron ten days to complete in temperatures reportedly reaching 58 degrees. With the closure of Omid Haft by the end of May, the task force had effectively cleared the last two substantial areas within the British area of responsibility (only temporarily, as usual, Kopak would flare up again, and Malgir remained cussedly hostile). The only disappointment in Omid Haft had been the performance of the ANA who flagged and refused to enter the most dangerous area inhabited by Alikozai. A further three soldiers were killed in the course of the operation, two of them shot by Taliban sharpshooters.

The dominance enjoyed by the British task force meant that sub-units were now effectively engaging in a modern version of imperial policing – perhaps the field where the British Army has always excelled. In the last week of April, D Company, 3 Mercians (Staffords), the Warthog Group, and the Danish B Mechanised Company, supported by a troop of Leopard tanks, mounted a series of three raids in the Gereshk area that uncovered a large number of IED components including seventy detonators. Successes such as these could not mask the fact that the Upper Gereshk Valley remained a place of ‘angry bushes’, as one subaltern wisecracked, violently resistant to any British attempts at pacification. In some villages like Adinzai and Kwoja Morad, the Taliban openly broadcast messages over mosque loud speakers, such was their confidence. This was not to argue that the insurgents were popular. As Lieutenant Fitzpatrick serving at PB Rahim with A Company, 3 Mercians discovered, farmers would discreetly tell patrols they wanted the British to kill the insurgents. Indeed, it was a constant source of puzzlement and frustration to many farmers why the British did not just see off the insurgency with blunt force. Over time, this led to the improbable conspiracy theory, voiced by Lashkar Gah’s burgeoning, chattering class of local journalists, that the British were secretly colluding with the Taliban, to avenge the reverse of the Battle of Maiwand. An important and rare advantage enjoyed by

Lieutenant Fitzpatrick was the presence of the ALP unit. These part-time policemen had grown up with the insurgents and knew them by sight. They also knew where all the IEDs were being buried. One policeman achieved a record by personally digging up twenty-eight such devices.

The Brigade Reconnaissance Force in the meantime conducted its first mission (Operation Pot Khanjer 4) and confiscated a small haul of 200 kilograms of wet opium. It followed this up with Operation Tufaan Qimat ('Storm Treasure') that netted around thirty pressure plates and a dozen prepared IEDs. At the beginning of May, B Company, 2 RGR undertook Operation Tora Gorga near Shin Kalay village rooting out insurgent firing points.[1077] This was the fourth major operation in this village since Juliet Company of 42 Commando first entered the settlement in December 2008. Nothing had changed.

Better intelligence was resulting in the uncovering of large IED factories. Near the village of Aga Khel Kalay, previously cleared in Operation Omid Haft, a tip-off led to the discovery of forty-four pressure plates, forty-five kilograms of high explosives, and eighty-one detonators. A subsequent operation by the Brigade Reconnaissance Force netted seventy-five pressure plates.[1078] In late July, Captain Nick Welby-Everard Torbet and Corporal Ed Williams (both serving with 101 EOD Engineer Regiment) endured a marathon in blistering temperatures clearing a compound of IEDs. Eventually they disposed of eighty-seven fully or partially constructed detonators, fifty-six detonators and sacks of explosives.[1079] These successes had to be set against the relentless pace of the insurgent IED campaign, fed by a seemingly inexhaustible supply of these cheap devices. In 42 Commando's first two and half months in the Chah-e Anjir Triangle, the marines had to deal with over 100 IED incidents. The vital track that linked Loy Mandeh to the capital – a purportedly secure area – had to be swept again in Operation Zamrod Pak 10, which yielded another twelve IEDs.[1080] This was the area from where a group of insurgents had attacked Lashkar Gah two days after 3 Commando Brigade last deployed in Helmand, in the autumn of 2008. Three years later, Taliban gangs had still not been eradicated from the immediate vicinity of Lashkar Gah. Nor were the soldiers avoiding close-run gun battles with the Taliban. On 21 July, a Gurkha multiple in Babaji was attacked by four grenades lobbed over their compound wall. One of the casualties was a sniffer dog called Hobo. Hobo was evacuated to Bastion and a week later the seemingly unfazed Labrador was back on duty, with a piece of shrapnel still lodged in its stomach.[1081] By this stage in the war the British had deployed a range of military working dogs for a variety of duties: protection, vehicle search, IED detection, arms explosive search, and

high assurance search. These canine companions made an invaluable contribution to the safety of countless patrols. One dog reportedly completed fourteen operational tours.

For most infantrymen a tour in one of the frontline patrol bases was beginning to resemble the experience of patrolling in Northern Ireland, albeit in a very different environment. Private Matt Mortimer, serving with 1 Platoon, A Company, 1 Rifles, captured the typical routine in the company blog:

'For the last 5 days, our Multiple has been on patrols. Each patrol varies in duration, route and purpose. On an average day we would get up at 0700 to wash and shave before breakfast – we get a good choice, sausages, bacon (or Spam!), black pudding, beans, fried bread, pancakes and porridge. The patrol will then set off at a previously specified time, which some days could be as early as 0500. One of our patrols lasted for 4 hours, and the aim was to investigate a well and meet the people who live nearby. When we got back to the PB we had lunch and spent the afternoon playing volleyball, going to the gym and reading after our kit had been checked and cleaned. On the second patrol we went on we set off at 1000. The purpose of this patrol was to investigate a compound which insurgents had used in the past. The Afghan National Army went in to the compound first and detained the owner for being an insurgent sympathiser. On the way back we stopped at one of the checkpoints for a debrief with the other multiple which was involved in the patrol, and then headed back to the PB in the late afternoon. The cookhouse put on some sandwiches for us and the rest of the day was ours to relax.

The next day we went on a ground dominating patrol to show the locals community that we are providing them with security. We got back to the PB at lunchtime, but we had orders for a patrol the following day, which we got up at 0230 for and set off at 0400, patrolling to one of the checkpoints and then to occupy a compound as part of a cordon while the Counter-IED team cleared the area around where a school is being built for local children. The clearance took a long time, so we were out for 15 hours.

Thankfully the next day of patrols was easier, setting off at about midday – which was really hot. We headed out to speak to a local elder regarding some IEDs which may have been planted by the insurgents and went to have a look but we couldn't find it so we came back in. Another early start the next day, as we got up at 0200 (although we did get bacon sandwiches and Weetabix for breakfast)! We left the PB a 0400 and went south to clear some compounds and provide defence for a meeting between the OC and the local community. This went well and were [sic] returned at about 1100, our last patrol before we went on guard to protect the patrol base.'

Although soldiers like Private Mortimer could now feel some confidence that the insurgents were on the back foot, the levels of violence remained high. Over the course of the summer there were on average over ten daily attacks, the majority ineffectual, but it meant that nobody could relax.

Overall, however, it had to be recognised that the British had at last pulled off the trick of pacifying central Helmand. The real measure of this was the unlucky A (Grenadiers) Company, 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters) who assumed responsibility for Kopak, in the south-west corner of Babaji, on the next rotation. Over the winter, this small area accounted for over half of all incidents in Task Force Helmand. Miserable weather added to the difficulties experienced by the soldiers. In typical Helmand fashion, and for no apparent reason A Company could fathom, the fighting then suddenly died away in the following year. Some NCOs in this company had served on Operations Herrick 1, 6, and 10 – effectively, the last decade of their lives had been spent either fighting, or training and preparing to redeploy to Afghanistan. Elsewhere in Babaji and Nad-e Ali, soldiers could find themselves manning check points and not firing a single shot from week to week.

The diminishing levels of fighting were now balanced by better organised ‘hearts and minds’ efforts. Veterinary clinics were mounted, which were hugely popular affairs with Helmand’s farmers. The British also learned the value of deploying American-style Female Engagement Teams (FETs). Over six months the brigade would hold 650 shuras with villagers, a quite outstanding effort to connect with the local population which would have been impossible even a year previously because of Taliban intimidation. As Brigadier Davis later remarked, he now had tens of thousands of counter-insurgents on his side.

Some aspects of life in the patrol bases remained unchanged: boring guard duties and rude children, as remembered by Lance Corporal Kelly Wolstencroft, a dog handler:

‘Earlier today when I was looking out into the green zone at all the poppies I heard kids shouting up to the sangar asking for “chocolate, chocolate” and “water, water”. Unfortunately I had nothing with me to give to them and was unable to leave my post, eventually they became annoyed and started throwing rocks and stones at me then left, but not before giving me the middle finger!’[1082]

In a sign of changing social attitudes, Kelly Wolstencroft was lesbian and wrote openly about her girlfriend on the British Army’s official web site. This was the young woman’s

second tour of Helmand. A more salient example was the case of Warrant Officer Deborah Penny. Deborah had previously been David. The warrant officer deployed on the last Herrick rotation and was the first transgender to serve in an operational tour in the history of the British Army.[1083]

The army was also transforming in other ways. An unfortunate propensity to forget lessons from the past was finally being tackled by the zealous Commander Force Development and Training, Lieutenant General Paul Newton. It would difficult to overstate Newton's influence. The British Army has always learned lessons, usually painfully, but generally failed to find a way of institutionalising them. Information technology provided the missing key. Over the course of two years, Newton promoted a series of intranet based learning sites that revolutionised the manner in which the army captured, learned, and recycled lessons from Helmand. If in a future war the British Army demonstrates greater wisdom than it manifested in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, some thanks will be due to this passionate and far-seeing general.

This improving picture could not mask the broader strategic and domestic problems facing the Defence Secretary, Liam Fox, all of which were coming to a head in the month of July. The script should have run something like this: British forces hand over the province of Lashkar Gah to Afghan security forces in a largely peaceful ceremony; a long-awaited report on the role of Britain's reserve forces is released, mixed artfully with the news that a further 18,000 soldiers will be cut from the Regular Army by 2020; Parliament goes into its summer recess, followed by the Westminster media pack.[1084] This was the narrative Liam Fox would have wished but, as always, events intervened again.

In late June, Kabul's long-suffering Intercontinental Hotel was attacked by seven suicide bombers who appeared to have been abetted by hotel security guards. In the end it took the intervention of a detachment of New Zealand SAS to see off the attackers but not before pictures of the iconic hotel in flames had been transmitted around the world. Then on 12 July, a former security chief of Ahmed Wali Karzai assassinated his former master in his private residence. The Taliban celebrated the assassination as their most successful operation in ten years, a revealing admission that the heartbeat of the insurgency rested in that most enduring Afghan cultural trait – taking revenge on your prize enemies. Just hours after the assassination, America's new commander in Afghanistan, General John Allen formally assumed command from the departing Petraeus. 'There will be tough days ahead,' he said, in an understatement.

The funeral that followed was pure Afghan theatre. The cortege was twice delayed by

roadside bombs. President Karzai, perhaps in a dress rehearsal of his own demise, leapt into the open grave and had to be pulled out by aides. Governor Mangal was ambushed on his way to the ceremony and two guards were killed. A bomb in Kandahar City killed a further six mourners including a prominent cleric. As if this were not enough, a frazzled Karzai returned to Kabul only to find himself attending a second funeral after one of his closest political advisors and a father figure, the former wrestler and mujahidin Jan Mohammed Khan, was killed in a suicide attack. Ten days later the mayor of Kandahar, Ghulam Hiadar Hamidid was killed by a 'turban bomb', a new twist on the Taliban's inventiveness with the design of IEDs. If this was the canvas of a secure Afghanistan in transition, it was not looking pretty. Not everyone was lamenting these deaths: Ahmed Wali Karzai had been viewed by some as the corrupt 'president of Kandahar', and Khan was blamed for Uruzgan's slide into insurgency through his vindictive policy of pursuing former rivals.

In Lashkar Gah, on 20 July, a colourful row of flags fluttered over the heads of dignitaries and senior officers as Britain formally handed over control of the district to the Afghan security forces. In response to Liam Fox's assertion that 'normal life' was returning to large parts of the provincial capital, the Taliban duly over-ran an ANA patrol base and murdered all its occupants. In the previous fortnight, a combined British-Afghan force had conducted Operation Pot Khanjer 20 in yet another attempt to disperse insurgents east of the city (an operation in which a Bombardier James Hallam, now on his third operational tour in Afghanistan, had a lucky brush with death when a bullet severed his helmet strap).The other nineteen Pot Khanjers had failed to suppress the threat of persistent attacks on Route 601. Two days before the handover, Lance Corporal Paul Watkins serving with 9/12 Lancers and Corporal Mark Palin, serving with 1 Rifles, were killed in separate attacks. Watkins was one of a small legion of South Africans now serving in the British Army. Palin left behind a widow and young son. The risks in the handover could hardly have been made more evident.

But as big a gamble for Britain lay in the long term, and in the role being sketched for the future reserve forces. The hand of now retired Lieutenant General Graeme Lamb was behind *Reserve Forces 2020*, the document describing the proposed future composition and roles of the Territorial Army, and its much smaller sister organisations in the Royal Navy and RAF.[1085] Lamb seemed to believe that Britain's 'part-time soldiers', steeped in a centuries old tradition of the county militias might be remoulded as a sort of US National Guard, a quite different organisation rooted in different cultural soil. This was

founded on his personal experiences with the US armed forces that widely employed reserve or national guard servicemen in roles ranging from fighter pilots to ship's captains, a vision that could hardly be translated to Britain's trivially small reserves. When Lamb joined the army, Britain's Territorial Army had fallen to under 100,000 strong, from a high of 200,000 in 1965. In 1979, the number fell again to 60,200. Following the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, it fell again to 40,000. It now had an effective strength of less than 20,000. Ironically, Britain might have met its defence needs through the better use of the Territorial Army, but for the relentless spiral of defence cuts.

The problem with *Reserve Forces 2020* was that Lamb's views were not generally supported. He got the report through by force of his reputation as a former SAS general, and crucially because it provided a 'positive messaging' story to balance the government's determination to cut the Regular Army by a fifth to around 82,000. The last minister to pull this trick was the Conservative John Nott in 1979-80 defence cuts. Fox needed Lamb to provide the intellectual firepower from a defilade position, which he duly supplied.

On the only occasion when Britain had relied on its Territorial Army in a critical situation – at the outbreak of the First World War – the *peacetime* strength had been fourteen divisions, soon increased to twenty-two divisions. Even so, the number of territorials who voluntarily agreed to overseas service (the name itself was derived to distinguish between soldiers that could be deployed overseas and those that could only be employed at home, or territorially) hovered around ten per cent. At the outbreak of war, just 18,683 out of 268,777 'Territorials' agreed to sign the liability of overseas service.[1086] Only two of the twenty-two Territorial divisions ever deployed, although in terms of battalions, the service was commendable: 318 eventually saw overseas service, out of a total of 1,142 battalions in the British Army. This had been the case since the days of the militias, and was still the case in Helmand Province, one hundred years after the founding of the modern Territorial Army. It was the reason why Wellington had been forced to raise a fresh *regular* army during the Napoleonic Wars; why Kitchener was forced to raise his New Army in the Great War; and why conscription was introduced in the Second World War (despite Britain sitting on a Territorial force 340,000 strong). The letter 'T' that distinguished the town and county volunteers from the Regular Army vanished from uniforms as the country scrambled to raise one, coherent, national army. Over half of the commanding officers had to be sacked, because they were unfit for service. Britain has never and could not rely on its 'Territorials'. The six divisions wiped out at the beginning of the First World War – which included regular and territorial soldiers – were known as

‘the Old Contemptibles’, precisely because the numbers had been contemptible. The eight divisions sent to France in 1940 were routed.

The modern Territorial Army was incapable of deploying a single battalion. Leaving aside the not inconsiderable cultural and legal hurdles that would have to be overcome to truly create a British ‘National Guard’, the numbers simply did not stack up. The notion that the Territorial Army was going to do more than it was capable of doing now – creditably providing individual reinforcements (known as ‘augmentees’), or small sub-units – appeared fanciful. This contribution was not small by any means: over a ten year period, more than 28,000 reservists served in one form or another in Iraq and Afghanistan, winning some seventy awards. The Territorial Army was a success story, in a very British mould. But it was not the answer to the manpower crisis in the army, and crucially, reservist soldiers could not *substitute* for regular soldiers – and this was the argument the government was making. The proposal that Britain could still count on around 100,000 soldiers, because the lump of lost regular soldiers was being substituted by a lump of reservist soldiers, was false. Britain could now count on around 80,000 soldiers, and some reinforcements, but nobody could say how many. Historically, and as a rough rule of thumb, roughly one in every ten reservists has volunteered to serve overseas. The only realistic arithmetical hope of achieving Lamb’s vision was through the politically unacceptable re-introduction of some form of voluntary national conscription for school leavers, or compulsory mobilisation of existing reservists, and a massive injection of funds, neither of which were being countenanced. The last time a British government had attempted to compulsorily call out reservists (the 1956 Suez Crisis), there had been riots. The government had no real hope of reaching its target of 30,000 trained reservists; within a matter of two years it became obvious from recruiting numbers that the existing Territorial Army was not only not growing, it was shrinking. As more than one critic pointed out, more Britons were heading off to Syria to join the insurgent group ISIS, than joining the Territorial Army. A botched IT program on which the recruitment drive rested further undermined the policy, forcing the government to move the target date to 2018 (and later to 2020). The appeal of the Territorial Army to politicians was purely financial, not strategic; the part-time soldiers were costing around 1.5 per cent of the total defence budget. Lamb perhaps took as his example General Creighton Abrams (the American general who created the modern US National Guard post-Vietnam), but he was possibly more a dupe. For the relatively cheap price of some transient poor headlines lamenting the further down-sizing of the British Army, and some dubious promises to make the reserve forces more effective, Fox had got his cuts. It was a short-term political win, but a

headache for all his successors.

3 Commando Brigade handed over to their successors 20 Armoured Brigade, commanded by Brigadier Patrick Sanders, on 9 October 2011. Brigadier Ed Davis had every right to feel some satisfaction. Local support for the presence of British troops had grown. The best indicator for this change in the attitude of ordinary Helmandis was the fact that four out of ten IEDs were being reported by locals (although this desire to be helpful could sometimes literally backfire when local farmers assured patrols that a track was clear of IEDs, only for the patrol to trigger a bomb). When the Estonian Company deployed to Loy Mandah after it was finally wrested from Taliban control it expected an insurgent reaction. Instead, over two months, the Estonians uncovered seventy IEDs as well as five IED factories, the majority pointed out to them by villagers (the Estonian Company, for a combination of reasons, proved the most successful in finding IEDs on Operation Herrick 14). Over the course of 3 Commando Brigade's tour, 7,200 kilograms of explosives were seized and over 400 IEDs neutralised. Eleven schools and three bazaars were refurbished, and forty-seven kilometres of hard-top road were laid. Overall, there was a 45 per cent reduction in attacks across the British area and an 86 per cent reduction in southern Nad-e Ali (where the ALPs were proving a success).

Pressure had been maintained on insurgent gangs. The Royal Scots Dragoon Guards, crewing the Warthogs, conducted over twenty deliberate operations, the longest of which lasted seven weeks. One squadron reckoned they racked up 85,000 miles on this Singaporean-built vehicle (or drove twice around the world). B Company, 2 RGR, based in Nad-e Ali, conducted over 1,000 patrols by the mid-way point of their tour. By the end of the deployment, this sub-unit alone would conduct twenty-eight deliberate, company-level operations. 9/12 Lancers mounted in Scimitars proved indispensable, in one incident crashing through thick undergrowth to reach a soldier who had triggered an IED and lost limbs. Within seven minutes the soldier had been retrieved and was receiving medical attention. The brigade's Close Support Logistic Regiment (CSLR) delivered over 3,000 vehicle loads of stores and supplies to the scattered patrol bases, perhaps the best measure of the tempo of British operations.

Taliban commanders had continued to be targeted, Davis revealing that in the first four months, sixteen low level commanders had been killed or captured. This number was down on the previous brigade that may have accounted for twice this number, but this suggested that Taliban commanders were electing to remain in Pakistan, which suited the British. This undoubted success had to be tempered by the fact that IED statistics still manifested an

upward trend. Putting down what had become a booming cottage industry was proving very hard. At the mid-tour point Davis offered that ‘attacks are about 43 per cent down on last summer’. It was undeniably the case that in some localised areas boredom was becoming a factor. Probably the most significant factor favouring the British was the American biometrics technology. By the time the marines left, over 100,000 Helmandis had been photographed, finger-printed or swabbed. This patient collection of data proved disastrous for unwary insurgents. Every week, a significant number of local young men were being arrested because they manifested positive matches; over 600 by the end of the tour. Could they have even begun to understand that servers in Texas had been their undoing? In fact, more insurgents were now being arrested than killed in gun fights. This was policing rather than soldiering, which also suited the British. British-built check points jumped from twenty-five to forty-seven, suffocating the insurgency with a denser matrix of bases. A staggering 6,000 patrols had been mounted.

Lieutenant General Zazai, the commander of 205 Corps, had wryly observed that ‘ISAF has everything except eyes and ears’, and there was some truth in this observation. But ISAF’s technological eyes and ears were chipping away at the insurgency and making life just that more difficult for the Taliban foot soldiers. By the time the commandos handed over to the incoming units, the Israeli Hermes 450 UAV had flown its 4,000th mission in Helmand. The American Reaper flown by RAF personnel, first deployed in October 2007, had launched its 200th Hellfire strike. And in the south, Royal Navy Sea King fitted with a maritime search radar were proving equally good at detecting cars in the seas of the Dasht-e Margo desert. These aircraft, deployed with 903 Expeditionary Air Wing, worked closely with the US Marine 2 Light Armored Regiment and Regimental Combat Team 5 who undertook the vehicle intercepts. In their most spectacular coup, 2,200 pounds of heroin were intercepted en route to Pakistan. Of course, the smugglers switched routes and divided consignments between multiple couriers, but the easy transits they had previously enjoyed were closed.

The handover to 20 Armoured Brigade coincided with the tenth anniversary of the war in Helmand which prompted a period of reflection on both sides of the Atlantic. *Time* magazine ran a feature on the war.[1087] The cover photograph showed a mountain road in Afghanistan leading nowhere with the caption: ‘Why the U.S. will never save Afghanistan’. Inside, the staff writer, an Afghan-American Aryn Baker, enumerated the blood and treasure spent over the last decade. Her conclusion was bleak: ‘And it simply isn’t working’. If *Time* was the voice of middle-America, then that voice was saying let’s

cut our losses and leave.

Ironically, even as the British were beginning to reap success in Helmand, controversy engulfed Defence Secretary Liam Fox. The story, involving his best man Adam Werritty posing as an official advisor and handing out business cards with the House of Commons logo, had all the ingredients for a perfect Westminster scandal. This was a tale of a charitable trust spending hundreds of thousands of pounds on non-charitable purposes; of a not-for-profit company receiving profitably large donations from a venture capitalist, and of a firm lobbying for Israeli interests. In the course of his duties, Werrity had booked first class flights and stayed in five star hotels. He had claimed a £2,260.82 bill from Ash Samtani Clothing of Hong Kong, £4,739.52 for tickets with Emirates Airlines, and a £379.60 bill for a night spent in a topless bar in New York[1088] - all this when Britons were being urged to live more austerely by the government. The scandal opened a fascinating window into the world of opportunistic characters that make a healthy income feeding on the defence sector pie, living lifestyles quite unimaginable to a soldier serving on the front line. Werritty was spending more on hotel and restaurant bills than a soldier got paid in a month fighting the Taliban.

Five days after the brigade handover in Helmand, Liam Fox resigned. Britain was now about to get her seventh secretary of state for defence in ten years – Philip Hammond, moving from the Department for Transport. At no time in its history had this ministerial post been swapped so many times in such a short space of time and against a background of two wars. The turbulence the Ministry suffered with the constant changes of government, leadership, policies and budgets had been huge. Fox, for all his political machinations, had been a decisive minister. Important reforms had been initiated. The defence budget had been protected against even steeper cuts. Later, he had acted as the axe man. His relations with senior officers had been cordial and it appeared he was genuinely missed by colleagues.

The key question over-hanging a successful transition was the reliability of the Afghan security forces. At the beginning of May, Corporal Ben Newton-Jones serving with 3 Platoon, A Company, 1 Rifles took over Patrol Base Jaba in the so-called ‘Padaka horseshoe’.[1089] The name came from the fact that the soldiers were surrounded by IEDs seeded around the village which was built in a horseshoe shape. This small base was only 600 metres from a major British patrol base (PB 4) but the soldiers found that the frontline was a matter of a few hundred metres from their sangars. On the eighth day at the base:

‘…the enemy attacked. We all moved to our stand-to positions and started to return

fire. We had come under fire from multiple firing points from the south-west through to the north, with the closest only 60 metres away. The sangar (sentry tower), under the command of LCpl Ashworth, was engaging enemy fighters to the south-west and west, in firing points about 100 to 150 metres away, with the .50 calibre heavy machine gun and the smaller yet equally devastating General Purpose Machine Gun (or GPMG for short).'

This was one of many scrapes and over the course of the summer the riflemen gained in confidence and wiliness to avoid the Taliban traps. When the riflemen quit the base they felt the area was more secure but conceded that the frontline could still be measured in a radius of 'a few hundred metres'. This is what the British had bought with all their blood and treasure. Would the 'few hundred metres' hold after Corporal Newton-Jones handed over to Afghan soldiers?

As many soldiers were killed on Operation Herrick 14 as on the first Operation Herrick 4. It had taken the British ten, six month rotations – ten brigades over five years - to restore the status quo ante bellum. This had been achieved by a combination of factors: the drastic contraction of the British area of responsibility coupled with the American reinforcement; the exploitation of key American technologies, notably surveillance systems and biometrics; the rush procurement of over £2 billion's worth of new, mostly American vehicles and weapon systems; better continuity and intelligence between the brigades; more astute tactics, particularly against the ever-present threat of IEDs; and finally a meaningful attempt at reconstruction in Helmand. None of these factors would have counted, but for the courage and determination of the soldiers and marines sent to the province. When Whiskey Company 42 Commando deployed to the north-east corner of Nad-e Ali, assuming control of Zarghun Kalay and Luy Bagh villages, it expected a typical Helmand tour. Some of their number would be killed, many more injured, and there would be gun fights every week. Six months later, to everybody's considerable surprise, the company left without firing a shot. John Reid's wish had come true. In at least one corner of Helmand, peace had been restored. This was the sound of success for the British. Silence.

CHAPTER 13
THE RUSH FOR THE EXIT DOOR
(Oct 2012-Dec 2014)

‘ur language is Pashto not Farsi/Dari. Ur out of mind. U and ur people (jews, turks, mongols, indians) has nothing to do with our language. Ur from the sulaiman ranges, Israel, Mongolia and Kasakhstan we are from Afghanistan. Tajiks are evrywhere Tajiks and they r a pure nation, moron…Only Pashtuns have turco-mongolian ancestory. Check your history and language. U have nothing to do with our culture, history, language, identity, food, roots..etc.. today, in Afghanistan we spit in your faces and treat ur worser than u treated Hazaras.’ [1090]

Thus did an anonymous Tajik address a Pashtun blogger in 2011, the year that ISAF finalised the timetable for *Inteqal*, or Transition. This vitriol was not uncommon. Ironically, it was made possible by Western aid money that shifted insults traded with bullets to electronic bulletin boards. The vituperative Tajik was blogging on the most popular forum on *Afghanistanonline* with over 41,000 visitors from a choice of thirty-five forums.[1091] The web master had been compelled to create a separate ethnic issues page because every single forum on the site (covering a range of subjects from sports to books) was being hijacked by ethnic slanging matches. Against such a background, what were the chances of a successful conclusion to ISAF’s decade-long war in Afghanistan?

General Petraeus underlined the stakes when he addressed a Congressional Committee in the spring of that year - ISAF only had one chance, and there would be no more opportunities to redress mistakes:

‘As we embark on the process of transition, we should keep in mind the imperative of ensuring that the transition actions we take will be irreversible. As the ambassadors of several ISAF countries emphasized at one recent NATO meeting, we’ll get one shot at transition, and we need to get it right.’[1092]

So much was true, but his testimony raised more questions than answers, not least: did the congressmen care anymore? Did the member nations in the ISAF ark care, or were the animals that went in two by two about to leap overboard at the soonest opportunity? Transition was a euphemism for withdrawal. In many eyes the sooner the better.

If a date has to be set for the beginning of withdrawal it might be 22 June 2011. On this day, at 7pm Eastern Time, President Obama made a pronouncement, at the same lectern from which he had announced the death of Osama bin Laden one month earlier, that America would withdraw over 30,000 troops from Afghanistan by the following summer – or in time to collect an electoral dividend in the forthcoming presidential election. Realpolitik had shoved its way to the front of the queue.

Washington was not the only capital now keeping a weather eye on the approaching storm clouds of elections and trimming its Afghan commitments accordingly. In November 2010, President Bronislaw Komorowski of Poland announced that Polish troops would be out of Afghanistan by 2012. Prime Minister Julia Gillard followed with an announcement in the spring that Australian troops would quit Uruzgan by 2013, or in time for the August federal elections as the Australian media was quick to point out. Britain had already signalled that as many as 450 servicemen would be withdrawn by the end of the year, and President Sarkozy hinted that around 10 per cent of the French contingent would withdraw by September, with the remaining forces concentrating in Kapisa Province. President Zapatero of Spain joined in, announcing that the contingent in Camp Stoner would pack up, leaving a reduced force in Baghdis Province. It little helped as his party was heading for an historic drubbing in the elections anyway. Sarkozy would also fall, but by a narrow margin. Angela Merkel simultaneously announced that Germany would begin withdrawing forces in the autumn. The Dutch and Canadian contingents had already withdrawn or were in the process of withdrawing over 2010-11, the latter having suffered 158 fatalities.

Within a year, this tip-toeing towards the exit had turned into an out-of-breath jog for the last bus by Europe’s somewhat overweight, middle-aged heads of state. Following his success in the French election, President Hollande kept his electoral pledge and announced the total withdrawal of French combat forces by 2013. By this stage, a number of shocking Green-on-Blue incidents had already swung French popular opinion sharply against the war. Merkel followed, pulling all German troops out of Kunduz by October 2013, in time for the general election which she handsomely won. Other nations on the fringes soon followed with similar announcements: Turkey, Belgium and the Czech Republic. Norway

released a statement that it would close its Provincial Reconstruction Team at Maimanah by the end of 2012, an announcement echoed by the Hungarians at Pul-e-Khomri in Baghlan Province.[1093] Bulgaria announced the withdrawal its force protection company from the Kabul Airport by January 2013; the Slovakians announced the withdrawal of their engineers from Kandahar and infantry from Tarin Kowt by December 2012; New Zealand pulled its special force unit; and Albania halved its commitment in Herat. Bankrupt nations like Greece were already unplugging computers and packing crates with Afghan souvenirs. Ten of the forty-eight contributing nations in the summer of 2011 had deployed less than fifty servicemen anyway: whether they stayed or went would make little difference. Most had avoided fighting and engaged in 'military tokenism'.

The official timetable for withdrawal was actually set at the Lisbon Conference in October 2011, but by then all the major contributing nations had stated their positions. NATO's rubber-stamp was hardly necessary. The NATO Secretary General cautioned:

'We need to be clear about what transition means and doesn't mean. Transition means that Afghan authorities take the lead and we move into a supportive role. But it doesn't mean a rush for the exit.'

His words fell on cloth ears; a rush is what it had become.

Other milestones were agreed and later confirmed at the Chicago Conference (20-21 May, 2012). The ANSF would assume the lead for security nation-wide by 2013. ISAF forces would shift from fighting to training and advising. The mission would officially end on 31 December 2014 (it actually ended on 28 December). NATO would not abandon its 'Afghan friends' at this cliff-hanger date. There would be an 'enduring commitment', but even Washington was avoiding getting drawn into the specifics of what this commitment might entail. Behind all this manoeuvring was the unanswerable and intractable question of long-term funding. The ANSF was an entirely artificial construct propped by Western aid money. In reality, America was supporting the patient with minimal support from partner nations. At Chicago, an American program to agree a more equitable arrangement for the long-term financial support of the ANSF was rebuffed by nervous and bankrupt Europeans. When Washington's most loyal ally, Britain, was offering less than one per cent of the required funds, what hope? Henry Kissinger, no stranger to difficult withdrawals from lost wars, was moved to quip that the exit strategy had become all exit, and no strategy.

The challenges facing an orderly transition were several. A commentator like Gilles

Dorronsoro adumbrated these in an early critique of the withdrawal process.[1094] The war was being closed unilaterally in the same way that 'victory' had been declared without reference to the enemy in the winter of 2001. Throughout, the Taliban had remained bystanders to Western policy decisions, largely driven by electoral considerations. Afghan security forces remained fragile. A prickly Pakistan was now waiting in the wings to pick up the pieces of American engagement in Afghanistan. The only real solution was credible negotiations with the Taliban but as long as the leadership was being attacked by a relentless American special force and drone campaign, the likelihood of meaningful negotiations remained slim. The early evidence from American withdrawals in eastern Afghanistan suggested that militants were simply seeping back into the lawless districts. The entire gamble was looking very shaky.

For Cordesman, withdrawal was 'a race against time, resources and the enemy'.[1095] The pessimists like Dorronsoro who saw a collapsing edifice were not giving credit to the undeniable reversal of fortunes on the battlefield. The real war was only two years old: the first eight years had been largely wasted. But could this advantage be handed over to Afghans to ensure long term strategic success? Cordesman was not so sure. Transition was an easily invoked word, but a transition to what? Would the uncertain strategy of clear-hold-build just mutate into withdraw, cease funding and provoke an economic depression? [1096] With the clock ticking, it was time to end the 'politically correct, totally dishonest, and vacuous conceptual plans'.[1097] Transition was in danger of turning into 'a Liar's contest', if that is not what it had already become. Barbara Stapleton, who so perceptively observed and described the first five years of the ISAF mission cast her sharp eye over the withdrawal and came to the equally depressing conclusion that it amounted to no strategy at all.[1098] Such was the expert opinion, and little was positive.

There were in reality several transitions, all of which had to be managed carefully, and any one of which threatened to derail the entire project. The ANSF needed to be stood up independent of ISAF. A credible civil service and justice system needed to be established. The economy had to be weaned away from its dependence on foreign aid. Government corruption had to be drastically reduced and a lasting political accommodation had to be sought between seemingly intractable foes. Pakistan was vital to these transitions, but would it cooperate or scheme?

Compared to this list of challenges, ISAF's territorial withdrawal was more straightforward. Over 2004-2006, ISAF had unrolled itself like a carpet in an

anticlockwise direction across Afghanistan. The carpet had since become frayed and had many holes. In other areas, the thread held. The plan was to hand over security responsibility to the ANSF, in four tranches over a period of two years, starting with the most secure areas and ending with the most contested. ISAF programs invariably begat organisations and transition was no exception. In this case, it was called the Joint Afghan-NATO Inteqal (Transition) Board, or JANIB. Its main function appeared to be to rubber stamp decisions taken elsewhere, and to claim useful salaries.

On 22 March 2011, Karzai duly announced the first tranche of transition. This involved the handover of seven districts and provinces: Kabul Province with the exception of Surobi District held by the French; Bamiyan Province; Panjshir Province; Mazar-e Sharif (capital of Balkh Province); Mehtar Lam (capital of Laghman Province); Herat City (capital of Herat Province); and Lashkar Gah. All but the last two were in the north and centre of the country, and the latter was, of course, in the British area of responsibility, a public relations boon for the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government that would be able to point to 'progress'. The announcement was followed by something of a dampener: on 1 April, rioting broke out in the first of the districts to transition (Mazar-e Sharif), that resulted in the deaths of seven UN workers.

Tranche 2 of transition was announced six months later on 27 November 2011. This was somewhat more complicated. Six provinces were handed over: Balkh, Daykundi, Takhar, Samangan, Nimroz and the remainder of Kabul Province. The cities of Jalalabad, Chagh Charan (Ghor Province), Sheberghan (Jawzjan Province), Feyzabad (Badakhshan Province), Ghazni (Ghazni Province), Maidan Shahr (Wardak Province), and Qala-e Now (Badghis Province) were added to the list. The following districts were also transitioned: Yaftal Safli, Arghanj, Baharak, Tashkan, Keshem and Argu in Badakhshan Province; Abkamari in Badghis Province; all districts of Herat province except for Shindand, Obi and Chisht Sharif; Qarghai in Laghman Province; Behsud, Quskunar and Sorkhrud of Nangarhar Province; all districts of Parwan Province except for Shiwari and Siahgherd; all districts of Sar-E Pul Province except for Sayyad; Beh Sud and Jelriz in Wardak province; and Nawa and Nad-e Ali in Helmand Province.[1099] Nawa had long been hailed as an exemplar of US marine success in central Helmand, although critics pointed out that the district had simply been swamped with money ($400 per inhabitant), buying short-term loyalty. In fact, scepticism over claimed 'success' in Nawa proved well-founded. As Task Force Leatherneck withdrew over the summer of 2012, the marginalised area of Trek-Nawa flared up again. Like the US marines, the British held up Nad-e Ali as the

centrepiece of their success. Here, it was the case that the insurgency had been suffocated and then displaced north-west across the Nahr-e Bugra canal into the dashte (desert), and south-east over the Helmand River into the Yakchal area. Would this protected community hold as the British withdrew? Nobody could be quite sure.

It was against the background of the successful completion of the Tranche 1 and 2 transitions that the second Bonn Conference was held in December 2011. This was to be the last of the great Afghan conferences held in a European capital and one of the most extravagant. There appeared to be an unfortunate inverse correlation between the number of delegates and the tangible achievements of these conferences. There was nothing at stake in Bonn: even suspending cynicism, there had to be a suspicion that the conference had provided a handy excuse for some duty free Christmas shopping for too many officials. Over 1,000 attended representing more than 100 countries and organisations. This number included over sixty foreign ministers.

Bonn little mattered because the two most important delegations, the Taliban and Pakistan, refused to attend. A last minute telephone call between Karzai and Gilani on 29 November failed to break Pakistan's obduracy on this matter. As a consequence, the conference descended into the usual platitudinous statements and pledges, re-hashed from the last jamboree. A nadir of fantasy was touched when Karzai announced a project to create New Kabul City, an epic undertaking that would have incited the envy of an old-fashioned dictator. This new city would arise from the Shomali Plain, be larger than the actual Kabul City, and cost $34 billion. Unsurprisingly, the madcap scheme was struggling to find investors.

Reality soon overtook this wonderland. On 6 December, coinciding with the Shia holiday of Ashura, bombs went off in Kabul, Kandahar and Mazar-e Sharif. *Lashkar-e Jhangvi Al-Alami* (LeJA), a Pakistani anti-Shia party claimed responsibility for the attack in Kabul, but denied knowledge of the other two. The Afghan Interior Minister Sadiq Sadiqi blamed the Taliban and the Haqqani Network. Whoever was behind the attacks - they almost certainly came about as a result of collusion between several insurgent groups and the ISI - they were sufficiently shocking to have their intended effect. Karzai expressed his shock at the outrage, packed his bags, and flew back to Kabul. The British in Helmand also found themselves dealing with an insurgent outrage. The day after the Ashura bombs, a civilian minibus approached an army checkpoint on the main route between Sangin and Lashkar Gah. The soldiers were undertaking a clearance operation and waved at the driver to stop. This instruction was ignored and the minivan attempted to

drive around the soldiers. As it did so, it triggered a large IED intended to destroy a heavy armoured vehicle. The minivan stood no chance and was blown to smithereens. Thirteen civilians were killed, the majority women and children. The quick reactions of the soldiers managed to save five lives.[1100]

The third tranche of transition was announced on 13 May 2012. Ashraf Ghani, head of the transition commission, stated: 'the third transition will be difficult, we don't want to lie to the Afghan people'. His nervousness was understandable. In a surprise move, all provincial capitals not already under Afghan control would be transitioned (twenty out of thirty-four). In effect, Tranche 3 was a truly nationwide transfer of security responsibilities, but in taking this course, Kabul was assuming control of provinces where security was tenuous. The number of provinces where security responsibilities had been completely handed over to Afghans now rose to eleven. This implied that three quarters of the population was now living in areas with no, or minimal ISAF presence. For the British, the significance of Tranche 3 was that it included Nahr-e Saraj District. This was the last area still under British primacy (Lashkar Gah and Nad-e Ali had been transitioned in the previous year). In 1969, General Creighton Abrams argued that American troop reductions were 'a necessary method of compelling the South Vietnamese to take over the war. They must!'[1101] The same sentiment pervaded Tranche 3 transition. The last stage – Tranche 4 – was declared in the summer of 2013, somewhat ahead of schedule. There was little fanfare as by now the ANSF were suffering in the order of 300 fatalities a month.

The important debate in the Vietnam War had revolved around the alternative strategies of 'thinning out', or withdrawing entire divisions at a time. The arguments were evenly balanced but it was ultimately decided that 'thinning out' simply left all areas equally vulnerable and would apportion 'a *degree* of risk to everyone, everywhere'. The better policy would be to effect divisional withdrawals and focus on the 'spaces' where American presence really mattered. This basic strategy did become somewhat muddied by a Westmoreland policy decision that undermined divisional cohesion and morale, but essentially the transition and withdrawal in Vietnam was by divisional-sized packages. In Afghanistan, the opposite policy was implemented. Across Helmand, the British task force and Task Force Leatherneck adopted a policy of thinning out. By 1972, Abrams observed 'maybe there comes a point, with the military, where you can't have a *few* military. You've got to have *none*'. For Cameron, facing an election in 2015, this moment could not come too soon.

What of the withdrawal from Helmand? This would, of course, be the second time a

foreign army had withdrawn from the region in a quarter of a century. In 1988, it had been the turn of 5 Guards Motor Rifle Division, or more accurately of some elements that remained at Bost Airport in Lashkar Gah, on Artillery Hill in Gereshk, and at Kajaki Dam (drawn from 370th Separate Spetznaz Battalion, subordinated to 22nd Separate Spetznaz Brigade headquartered at Lashkar Gah). Helmand did not matter to the Soviets. It was only important because it lay astride the south-western loop of the Afghan ring road (Highway 1), a major withdrawal route for Soviet forces. Ironically, British security priorities would exactly mirror those of the Soviet withdrawal: secure Nad-e Ali, Gereshk, and the vital Route 601 and Highway 1.

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, as authors like Roderic Braithwaite have pointed out, was not the shambolic flight portrayed in Western propaganda, but a well-executed scheme.[1102] One officer recalled the emotional farewell in Jalalabad in these terms:

'The farewell of the Afghans with our soldiers was touching. During the passing of our troop column through Jalalabad, more than 12,000 local inhabitants came out on the streets. Standing tightly packed on the shoulders of the highway, common Afghans threw flowers and confetti, envelopes with greetings and goodbyes written in Russian, and flags with quotations from the Koran on the armour of the passing vehicles.'[1103]

The same scenes were played out in Kabul where a grand farewell parade was organised, attended by tens of thousands of Kabulis. The column of hundreds of vehicles took five hours to pass review. ISAF would not have dreamt of organising such an event (indeed, the ISAF closing ceremony in 2014 was held unannounced to avoid attacks). The same officer recalled: 'Everywhere was a sea of flowers, banners hung with slogans in Russian and Afghan languages, flags, and music'. President Najibullah extemporised a forty minute speech praising the Russian soldier, a courtesy unlikely to be extended by President Karzai, and the tears flowed. Such was the Soviet departure.

Unlike the British who had either sacked or alienated the traditional power-brokers in Helmand, the Soviets co-opted these to smooth their departure from the province. The pro-Soviet Shah Nawaz Helmandwal was appointed governor. Two militia commanders, Khan Mohammed, known as Khano, and Allah Noor, a Barakzai, were given Soviet backing.[1104] Where ISAF transitioned to the ANSF, the Soviets in provinces like Helmand transitioned to the local power brokers. Over the summer, Garmsir, Nad-e Ali, Lashkar

Gah, and finally Gereshk were handed over to militias. From the Soviet perspective, backing the militias had the obvious advantage that it was a much simpler task than trying to stand up functioning armies or police forces. The Soviets used these militias to mount one last offensive against the northern tribes, pitting Afghans against Afghans to secure their own withdrawal. The last Soviet unit to depart northern Helmand was reportedly a *spetznaz* company at Kajaki. Contrary to popular legend, this unit was not surrounded and massacred by wild-eyed mujahidin. It left the same way it arrived, by helicopter, leaving behind the minefields which tripped British paratroopers in 2006.

The British withdrawal from Helmand was always likely to be quite different to the Soviet experience. For all the mistakes that were made at the beginning of the war, it would be highly ungenerous not to recognise that Task Force Helmand quit the province in good order and with dignity. The measure of just how effective the British had become as a counter-insurgent force can be taken from the success ratio of the last actions. Without exception, every deliberate operation from about the summer of 2012 yielded results: a cache, a weapon find, or a stash of explosives. Targeting of insurgent commanders became a precise skill and the British got terribly good at it. Poor intelligence had been transformed into excellent intelligence thanks to the influx of American resources, and this was always going to be the key to 'winning' militarily.

The foundations of the withdrawal were laid in the summer of 2011, well in advance of the actual troop withdrawals. The signs that this was a war being wound down not ramped up were everywhere. Half of all infrastructure programs at Camp Bastion were cancelled. £50 million's worth of ammunition was destroyed or returned to Britain. Eventually as many as 500 tons of unusable ammunition had to be destroyed, the British deploying a novel small arms incinerator to complete the task quickly. Over 5,000 tons of military equipment made the journey home by sea or air. Another 268 ISO containers were filled with other stores. Aircraft spare parts were reduced by between 25 and 38 per cent. Vehicles like the Panther and Springer that had failed to distinguish themselves in Helmand ended up making the long journey home in the back of C-17 transport aircraft. [1105] The last of the Snatch Vixens joined them. This essential housekeeping was just the beginning of a mammoth exercise for the Royal Mechanical and Electrical Engineers (REME) who would attempt to salvage as much serviceable equipment as possible from Helmand. The fact was that the war – like all wars – would result in writing off millions of pounds of equipment and infrastructure investment.

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By the summer of 2012, logisticians calculated that around 3,000 vehicles and 11,000 ISO containers would have to be returned to Britain, with an estimated value of £4 billion.[1106] Later the numbers were refined to 3,345 vehicles and around 5,500 containers. By the end of 2013, some 1,467 vehicles and 2,000 containers had been flown or shipped back to the UK, but 1,479 containers had been scrapped or sold off, a not insignificant wastage rate.[1107] Attempting this task would have been impossible without the battalions of Western civilian contractors and Locally Employed Staff (LES) based at Camp Bastion and elsewhere. For the latter, the departure of the British (and Americans at Camp Leatherneck) signalled the end of a good run. The more skilled workers could earn as much as $500 a month, or more than the going rate paid by the insurgency. By the end of the war, the British were providing steady employment for as many as 800 Afghans at Camp Bastion. This labour pool was not without its occasional conflicts, mostly due to misunderstandings and under-resourcing, but the British could be proud that they largely treated their Afghan employees with fairness. The old touch from imperial days had not quite vanished. In a few cases, local staff threatened by the Taliban were generously paid off and relocated by the British. Happily, these cases were relatively few, as more often than not the Taliban themselves were profiting hugely from the ISAF contracts.

The air bridge was the primary route by which the British departed Helmand. All personnel left by air, with a not insignificant amount of freight. As in the build-up of Task Force Helmand at the beginning of the war, the assistance of the civil airline industry was vital to this effort. Southern Air provided a small fleet of Boeing 747s, each with an eighty ton payload capacity, which was used to recover more sensitive items that could not be risked on the overland routes. The kings of materiel transportation, with their long experience and resources, were the US marines and TRANSCOM (Transport Command). But the British learned handy lessons and practices by working alongside their American colleagues, and there was generous cooperation on both sides.

There were two land routes: the traditional southern route through Pakistan and a new northern route opened by American negotiators (known as the Northern Distribution Network). This latter route started at Termez on the Uzbekistan border, transited via Ozidip on the Russian border, and ended at Riga. The epic 4,000 mile rail journey would carry the task force’s stocks past the landscapes of the Battle of Stalingrad. On both routes, the British, like the Americans, were reconciled to the fact that there would be smuggling, losses, corruption, and probably a good deal of espionage. How could Russian intelligence officers not resist covertly breaking into a few British Army containers on the long

journey across the Russian steppes? Even without the threat of espionage, there was the likelihood of petty and more serious criminality. Soldiers have always used unit movements to shift goods illicitly across national borders. Over the course of the war, hundreds of cartons of cheap cigarettes were being intercepted by air security staff. How many got through on the industrial conveyor belt of ISO containers will never be known. Criminal gangs have always been known to 'piggy-back' government cargos, thus evading normal customs controls. What could be more convenient for a Kazakh heroin mafia than a line of poorly guarded ISO containers destined for Lowestoft or Harwich, or drivers that could be readily bribed to hide consignments in their trucks?

The cost of this operation was huge. Given that each ISO container reportedly cost in the order of $10,000, it was probable that the total repatriation of equipment was costing around $200 million every month. Just to meet the 2014 deadline, some 400 containers had to be shifted out of Camp Bastion on a monthly basis. In fact, by the beginning of 2013 it seemed the arithmetic might not add up and the task force presence would have to be extended to the spring of 2015, with the total closure of all British assets extended to 2016. This estimation proved pessimistic and the last commander of Joint Force Support (Afghanistan) - Brigadier Darrell Amison – completed the epic task on time. The British effort paled in comparison with the headache presented to American logisticians, faced with recovering around 50,000 vehicles and $50 billion's worth of equipment About one tenth of this equipment was scheduled to be left behind, gifted to the ANA, or written off.

The saga of communications and IT systems gradually unwound but not without headaches. After all the soreness and cost behind the Bowman radio, it remained an unpopular system. Critically, WGS 84 (World Geo-Reference System) mapping underlying Bowman was not compatible with the maps actually used by troops: this factor alone implied limited utility. By 2013, a radio system that had not even been in service ten years and which had cost an estimated £2.6 billion was already being quietly side-lined and a successor software-defined radio system was being sought. The two most-used tools in Afghanistan, in fact, were Microsoft Office and Google Earth. For all the hundreds of databases that were created, officially, and unofficially, by ISAF soldiers trying their best to solve urgent problems, the overwhelming majority of documents were standalone. The ad hoc and rushed manner in which communication networks had grown necessarily meant that application did not speak to application, database did not speak to database, and radio did not speak to radio. 'Mandraulics' – a human typist – became the default setting in an age of supposed digitisation. If the phrase 'never again' is applied to the war in Helmand, it will surely apply to the British Army's first attempt at fielding digital communications. To

be fair, Task Force Helmand's woes were as nothing compared to the wider ISAF communication networks, almost certainly penetrated by Chinese and Russian intelligence. The truth was that every army was struggling to master digital communications and data networks, including the US Army which wasted billions on inadequate systems. But for the heroic efforts of the Royal Corps of Signals, it would have been a lot worse.

The thorny question of Camp Bastion Hospital was one of the more difficult to resolve. In the last two years of the war there were 335 doctors and nurses serving in this facility (240 UK, eighty-five US, and ten Danish). The hope that the ANA would establish its own medical service had been over-optimistic with the result that everyone depended on this single hospital: ISAF, the ANSF, insurgents, and ordinary Helmandis. It had always been the intention to avoid creating a dependency culture but where else could you find emergency resuscitation, operating tables and intensive care units? Even with the decline in casualties, the casevac helicopters remained busy. As late as the autumn of 2011, around 400 casualty evacuations were being undertaken *every month*.[1108] The majority of admissions were British and coalition soldiers but the majority of surgery hours were actually accounted by local nationals (as many as 300 hours per month at a peak). Bastion Hospital became what it never intended to be: the default life-saving hospital for everyone in Helmand. Scores of insurgents owed their lives to the operating tables at Bastion (sixty odd hours of surgery per month at a peak). This generosity to an enemy some felt utterly undeserving was never reported. One fifth of patients were Afghan children whose only hope of survival was Western medicine. The hospital even had to deal with a surprise premature birth within the task force (the mother was Lance Bombardier Lynette Pearce, a Fijian). In the end, Camp Bastion Hospital was a noble if short-lived gift to Helmand. The closure of the hospital was not quite the end of the story. In an equally noble gesture, the US marines left behind a $10 million, thirty bed hospital for the Afghan security forces.

The last sequence of British brigades, from Operation Herrick 15 to 20 (October 2011 to October 2014) ran: 20 Armoured Brigade (Brigadier Patrick Sanders); 12 Mechanised Brigade (Brigadier David Chalmers); 4 Mechanised Brigade (Brigadier Bob Bruce); 1 Mechanised Brigade (Brigadier Rupert Jones, the son of Lieutenant Colonel 'H' Jones, killed at the battle of Goose Green); 7 Armoured Brigade (Brigadier James Woodham); and 20 Armoured Brigade (Brigadier James Swift, who did not deploy with his brigade).

Over the first half of 2012, Task Force Helmand collapsed fifty-two of its bases leaving British soldiers holding just thirty-four.[1109] This involved the clearance of as many as 1,000 ISO containers to Camp Bastion that began to resemble a vast desert scrap yard. By

the end of Operation Herrick 17, British, Danish and Estonian troops were deployed in just nineteen patrol bases: the former American FOB Ouellette in 'Ops Box Burma', six patrol bases in Nahr-e Saraj, eight in Nad-e Ali, and four in Lashkar Gah. By the summer of 2013, this number was down to thirteen, and the British had almost entirely withdrawn from Lashkar Gah. By Christmas, it was down to five. By February 2014 the British had concentrated their remaining forces in just three bases, and by the summer all troops were based where the story had begun, in Camp Bastion. The last British outpost to close down was Sterga 2, located on a hilltop east of Bastion, in mid-May. At the time it was manned by around eighty soldiers: Highlanders supported by gunners from 3 Royal Horse Artillery and 32 Regiment Royal Artillery, as well as a small contingent of signallers from 14 Signal Regiment. Their commander was the twenty-six year old Captain Edward Challis who took some pride in being the last of the last. US marines quit Sangin over the same period. In a modest ceremony, Task Force Helmand officially ceased to exist on 1 April 2014 and the last down-sized brigade was subordinated to the American-led Regional Command South-West. Another milestone was reached on 15 September 2014 when the British Forces Broadcasting Service (BFBS) closed down its radio and television transmitters for the final time after broadcasting continuously for almost 3,000 days. At its peak the service had maintained nearly 100 transmitters across Helmand and Kabul and broadcast more than 15,000 hours of television programs ('Downton Abbey' proving a surprise hit with American marines).[1110] Operation Herrick ended on 31 October, replaced by Operation Toral, the successor support operation. On the previous Sunday 26 October, the Union Flag was lowered for the last time in Camp Bastion. It was in a sense an anti-climactic moment. After thirteen years, the world had moved on. The last British soldiers to die on Operation Herrick were killed in an air accident involving a Lynx helicopter that summer (regrettably, it appears the pilot may have been undertaking an unauthorised manoeuvre). They were Captain Thomas Spencer, Flight Lieutenant Rakesh Chauhan, Warrant Officer Second Class Spencer Faulkner, Corporal James Walter, and Lance Corporal Oliver Thomas. The latter was a reservist serving with the Intelligence Corps. Britain's volunteer soldiers had given to the end.

The war ended as it began. Brigadier Ed Butler was instructed that Operation Herrick was all about 'minimisation'. The last formation – 12 Mechanised Brigade - was given the same instruction. Nobody has ever won a war through a strategy of 'minimisation', or will. 'Minimisation' is not a military strategy – it is political calculation. This raises an unavoidable point. It is difficult not to conclude that the jihadist domino theory was total hogwash. The British government never believed that a soldier had to die in a corner of

south-west Afghanistan to assure the ‘safeness’ of Britons at home. From start to finish Operation Herrick was about satisfying Washington and minimising domestic electoral liability. The price of this charade was 450 odd lives. The cost was £37 billion. The question of conscience hangs awkwardly.

The experiences of the last Brigade Reconnaissance Force, commanded by a Major Hugo Lloyd, were archetypal of a dishonest war fought on false pretexts. By 2104, ‘casualty paranoia’ and extreme risk aversion had overtaken every other consideration. Operations were mounted, not on the basis of intelligence, but based on the criteria whether the mission would be benign and not result in any casualties. A more pointless employment of soldiers would be hard to invent. The Brigade Reconnaissance Force was largely constrained to an immediate twenty-five kilometre orbit around Camp Bastion, now designated a ‘Main Defensive Area’. Defending against what was a moot question. A remarkable 739 compounds were searched in twenty-six heliborne operations. Nothing of significance was found because there was no threat. From July until the end of October, not a single shot was fired, or as Lloyd laconically recorded, ‘Op HERRICK 20 Brigade Reconnaissance Force (BRF) neither killed nor was killed’. This was not so much John Reid’s wish coming true as a war ending on a ‘whimper’, as Lloyd also honestly noted.

The last Union Flag was carried from Camp Bastion by a Wing Commander Matt Radnall.[1111] This symbolic moment had more than a sense of madness about it. Both the Americans and British had been keen to avoid a ‘Saigon moment’. There was no chance of that, but the theatre of the last withdrawal was surreal. Radnall was clad in protective gloves, ballistic goggles, a helmet and Osprey body armour. Above him were circling British Apaches, USMC Super Cobras, RAF Tornado GR.4s, USAF B-1 Lancer bombers, and Reaper UAVs. Had so much firepower ever been deployed to accompany a flag home? After eight years of fighting nowhere in Helmand had passed the ‘Abrams Test’: the province was now less secure than when Task Force Helmand first turned up.[1112] The British and Americans left behind 298 concrete buildings, including fourteen fully equipped gyms and a 64,000 foot square $18 million command and control centre that was never used.[1113] The two runways and air control facilities were destined to run down due to a lack of maintenance skills and spare parts. The Afghans left behind in the now empty Camp Bastion began racing around in abandoned American golf carts, to the amusement of the departing British. It seemed a fitting last image. Within a month the Taliban had attacked and entered Camp Bastion. This also seemed fitting.

Concurrently with this drawdown, more than 180 checkpoints and patrol bases were bequeathed or constructed for the ANSF. Within a year, roughly half of these would be abandoned, particularly in remote or indefensible areas. By October 2013, *Pajhwok* news was reporting that many of these old bases on which so much blood and treasure had been expended, were now being dismantled.[1114] The matrix of British-built forts had barely lasted two years. On key lines of communication like Route 601, by contrast, there was a police check point every few hundred metres, although this saturation of security could not prevent continued insurgent attacks. For the locals, the collapse of British patrol bases provided a bonanza of raw materials: wood, corrugated tin, discarded pallets, and the ubiquitous Hesco barriers. Sympathetic British commanders invited friendly villagers to join in the dismantling of the bases, an invitation that was never refused, and an activity which resembled a sort of organised looting.

The British withdrawal did not imply a winding down of patrols or fighting. Over the course of 2012, the last year in which Task Force Helmand maintained a presence across the Green Zone, around 600 patrols were being mounted every week. 12 Mechanised Brigade recorded seventy-five IED strikes against vehicles, one fifth resulting in the vehicle being written off. The same formation found over 800 IEDs. A weekly average of forty attacks was being recorded, the overwhelming majority initiated by insurgents. The argument that ISAF had seized the initiative from the insurgency was always a little over-cooked. These numbers implied a roughly one in fifteen chance that a British patrol would end up in a gun fight. This broad statistic, however, masked great differences. In some areas of Nad-e Ali, nobody fired a shot for months. In the Upper Gereshk Valley, every patrol was being fired at, as if nothing had changed since the first British troops entered this area in 2006. The British actually suffered more fatalities in 2012 – the year when the withdrawal ramped up – than in the previous year. 12 Mechanised Brigade suffered twenty-two fatalities, and 199 wounded (including eighteen amputees). The formation reckoned they accounted for around 450 insurgents, killed or wounded. Over fifty ‘Jackpots’ were recorded, that is, the detention or killing of more high value insurgents, rather than simple foot soldiers.

The intensity of the fighting was evident in the ammunition expenditure figures. In the last two years of the war – when Task Force Helmand was essentially withdrawing – British soldiers still managed to fire off 7,481,687 rounds of 5.56mm and 1,579,348 rounds of 7.62mm ammunition.[1115] More rounds were fired off in the last six months than in the first Operation Herrick 4 that witnessed the ‘platoon house’ sieges. Nor did the use

of heavier weaponry entirely subside. On Operation Herrick 17 (October 2012 – March 2013), the task force lobbed 4,119 artillery shells. It finally quit Helmand to the sound of 1,261 exploding shells (from a total 8,197 from October 2012 to September 2014). The Apaches were also busy. They flew home having rattled off 190,753 30mm cannon rounds. It was a measure of just how dependent the ground troops had become on this machine to keep the insurgents at bay that in the final six months, the last Apache squadron fired off over 37,000 30mm cannon rounds (incidentally, costing in the order of £7 million, setting aside the fuel and maintenance costs behind a single Apache sortie).

Overall ammunition expenditure told an extraordinary if predictable story. In total, Task Force Helmand expended 63 million bullets in its eight year war, including training ammunition. This illustrated one of the great paradoxes of modern wars, namely that despite being armed with the most advanced muskets in the history of warfare, soldiers fire off thousands of bullets and fail to hit anything. Even subtracting a generous proportion of the gross total as training ammunition, and making an equally generous assumption that ten insurgents were killed for every British fatality, this still implies that the average front line soldier was expending many thousands of bullets for every enemy killed. Of course, the musketry of the enemy was equally dire. As the overwhelming majority of gun fights took place at long ranges, against an enemy neither side could actually see, it perhaps should not surprise that it all amounted to a cacophonous but mostly harmless shouting match.

The experience of 1 Royal Anglian that had sacrificed much in the summer of 2007 was typical. Over six months, the battalion found over 150 IEDs, detained sixty-eight insurgents, and impounded over 100 kilograms of explosives. The Light Dragoons, under Lieutenant Colonel Sam Plant, also a veteran unit of a previous successful tour, mounted some 248 operations that involved searching 1,700 compounds. More than three tonnes of explosives were recovered. As a whole, 12 Mechanised Brigade mounted close to 900 operations and nearly 150 heliborne operations. The tempo, by the end, had become phenomenal.

The real cost in lives was being paid by the ANSF, no longer protected by Task Force Helmand, and always somewhat casual. By the end of 2012, ANSF fatalities had jumped over 40 per cent. By the summer of 2013, more than 300 casualties were being suffered per month. ANA casualties indeed told the other side of the war, largely unreported in the West. In 2003 just nine Afghan soldiers were killed. In the succeeding three years the numbers steadily climbed from fifty-one, to 138, to 206. Then a hike became evident: 380

(2008), 635 (2009), 748 (2010), 831 (2011), 1,170 (2012), and 1,392 (2013). On the eve of ISAF's withdrawal the total had reached 6,853.[1116] In typical NATO fashion, the answer to this haemorrhaging was to form another committee – in this case, the Attrition Working Group. For all the warring parties, the game was winding down in a costly fashion. Despite the overwhelming firepower advantages enjoyed by Task Force Helmand, the friendly-enemy KIA:WIA ratio, not counting special force operations, actually ended on a rather modest 1:2 (for every one British soldier killed or wounded, two insurgents it appears were killed or wounded). Perhaps it was just as well that full time was approaching.

Task Force Helmand's withdrawal was significantly driven by the withdrawal of Task Force Leatherneck. No British government could afford to be left holding the line in Helmand, and the blame for failure. Promises of a measured and conditions-based withdrawal were abandoned by the Obama administration in the run-up to the 2012 presidential election. In Helmand, this meant a 'steep' and 'painful' rush for the exit by Task Force Leatherneck (against the wishes of the US marines who perceived premature departure as an insult to their fighting prowess). At one stage, a marine had been located in 250 bases across southern and northern Helmand. By April 2012, this number had fallen to around 100. Just in time for the election, it was reduced again to just twenty-six bases. In six months, a 19,000 strong force had been reduced to 7,000 including just two infantry battalions. This number was matched by almost exactly the same number of civilians at Camp Leatherneck, tasked with winding down the operation.

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Sangin had been the British Army's Passchendaele in Helmand, and so it turned out for the US marines. In honour of the sacrifice, a marching trail at Quantico boot camp would be named 'Sangin', because it exemplified 'everything that is good about the Marine Corps'. 3/7Marines had taken over from British counterparts in the summer of 2010. Like all new boys, the unit had ignored the advice of its predecessors and quickly suffered a large number of casualties. This unit handed over to 3/5 Marines 'Darkhorse' that became infamous for suffering the most number of casualties of any marine unit in Afghanistan. On the very first patrol, a marine was shot and killed within 100 metres of FOB Jackson. Over the next four days, another eight were killed. 3/5 Marines made their mark in Sangin by completely flattening all buildings either side of the deadly Pharmacy Road. By the time the unit handed over to 1/5 Marines in March 2011, it had suffered twenty-five fatalities and 184 wounded including thirty-four amputees. Ironically, Defense Secretary Gates became

so concerned with the plight of the marines in Sangin he volunteered to withdraw them, the very strategy which the British had proposed at the beginning of the war, and for which they were criticised by a bullish American military leadership that fretted over British 'lack of fight'. The marines refused the offer, predictably.

1/5 Marines left in October 2011 having suffered another seventeen fatalities and 191 wounded. Sangin was only finally subdued over the winter of 2011-2012 by the collective efforts of 3/7 Marines, 1/6 Marines, 3 Recon Battalion and nineteen M1A1 tanks. Volleys of HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket System) also helped. The last full battalion to serve in Sangin was 1/7 Marines. It left in October 2012 having suffered just six fatalities, but this was attributable to the fact that by then the marines had handed over the problem to the Afghans, with unhappy results. ANSF casualties rocketed: from mid-March to mid-July, 147 ANSF were killed in Helmand compared to fifty-seven in the previous year. Coalition deaths fell from fifty to thirty-one over the same period. The American marines, much like the British before them, were unwilling to accept the sacrifice had been in vain. It was argued that attacks had fallen to just 25 to 30 *per day*, and that in the final fighting season in 2012 only 570 IEDs had been encountered. Memories were unbelievably short. In 2006, four attacks per day was considered bad, and tens not hundreds of IEDs were being encountered. Sangin was being left in a far worse condition.

A sort of denouement seemed to unfold on 16 December 2013. On this day, Prime Minister Cameron was unfortunately ambushed by a journalist at Camp Bastion with the toxic 'mission accomplished' phrase. The day before, largely unnoticed by the media, Taliban gangs, in collusion with the 2 Brigade, 205 Corps of the ANA drove into Sangin, and the Taliban white flag was once again seen fluttering over the bazaar. It later transpired that some sort of deal had been struck between the soldiers and insurgents, who had ganged up on the police. A full year before the final ISAF withdrawal, the town which had cost the British over one hundred lives and a similar number of lives to the US marines, was being contested by the Taliban. By the summer of 2014, the fighting was taking place in the environs of the District Centre, as it had done in 2006. The entire exercise had been pointless.

The truth is nobody succeeded in taming northern Helmand. In December 2010, Task Force Leatherneck took a swing with Operation Outlaw Wrath. It enjoyed as little success as British attempts to quell the insurgency. This was followed by Operation Eastern Storm in November 2011, and Operation Branding Iron in August 2012, the last major USMC

operation in Helmand. Ironically, this operation which involved a drive from Sangin to Kajaki, almost exactly mirrored the last major Soviet operation in Helmand. History had exactly repeated itself, at least on Route 611.

In each case, the results were transient and the insurgents regained lost ground. In the winter of 2012, Northern Helmand was taken over by 2/7 Marines. This battalion posted platoon-sized units in Now Zad, Musa Qaleh, Kajaki and the Sangin Valley. Smelling victory, the Alizai and allied tribes moved swiftly. In a matter of two weeks, all the ground from Kajaki to halfway down the Sangin Valley was recaptured. ANA checkpoints were either abandoned, or the occupants were evicted, or deals were struck between the insurgents and the Afghan soldiers. This left a marooned marine platoon at the dam, exactly where the British had started in the spring of 2006. In Musa Qaleh, tribesmen sealed the town from the south, and half the police deserted. Much of this was down to continuing power struggles between the Akhundzadas and rivals. By the summer of 2013, the ANSF had simply quit eighteen checkpoints built for them by departing ISAF engineers. The last contingent to leave Musa Qaleh was a Georgian company, which had a miserable time in this town and even suffered a kidnap (the luckless and lifeless sergeant was found three weeks after his disappearance). Now Zad also became encircled. Only Sangin had held out, but even here it was clear that time was running out. In the first six months of 2013, there were six district chiefs of police in Sangin, eroding whatever security gains had been made. By the Christmas of 2013, an unholy alliance of Akhundzada's men, the Taliban, and corrupt policemen (some Akhundzada's relatives) had yielded Musa Qaleh and Kajaki Districts. Now Zad, where the British misadventure began with 3 Para launching Operation Mutay in the spring of 2006, was also back in tribal hands. The British and Americans, lacking the resources and will, simply accepted these reverses. By the summer of 2014, the Taliban, almost certainly abetted by covert Palistani support, mounted a concerted assault involving hundreds of insurgents. This surge succeeded in re-capturing all of northern Helmand, except the main towns.

The same pattern repeated itself in Southern Helmand where 3/8 Marines deployed in Marjah, Nawa, Garmsir and Khar Nishan. Here, a direct correlation existed between the distance to Lashkar Gah and the willingness of the ANSF to hold the line once the marines departed; the further from the centre, the lower the morale. In some locations, the marines were resigned and sympathetic to the fact that the Afghans would abandon the post as soon as they left. With no guaranteed logistics, or medical evacuation, or even food and bullets, why should they be expected to hang around?

From 2012, the final British dispositions were based around five battlegroups: CF (Coalition Force) Burma; CF Nahr-e Saraj North; CF Nahr-e Saraj South, Training Support Unit (TSU) Nad-e Ali; and TSU Lashkar Gah. With the completion of Tranche 3 Transition, these gradually collapsed to single TSUs for each district, and then to none by the summer of 2013.

By far the toughest assignment – and the last major bastion of resistance the British faced in Helmand - was Ops Box Burma. This was an area of roughly 500 square kilometres in the Upper Gereshk Valley. Home to possibly 8,000 villagers and located halfway between Gereshk and Sangin, this had been a lawless and untamed swathe of the Green Zone from the beginning. The area was dirt poor: not a single clinic, just three madrassas, and no electricity. There were four major settlements in Burma: Hyderabad (Ashakzai, Barakzai and Ishaqzai); Qaleh-ye Gaz (predominantly Ishaqzai); Mirmanbad (Khugyagi, Alikozai and Barakzai), and Shurukay (Ishaqzai, Barakzai). The Ishaqzai dominated the western bank of the Helmand and this tribe remained an unrelenting foe of Western soldiers. In turn, the Ishaqzais were supported by Noorzai, Kakars and Pakistani fighters.

When Task Force Leatherneck inherited Sangin it also inherited the Upper Gereshk Valley. The US marines built a substantial base on the edge of the Green Zone (FOB Ouellette) but decided they lacked the numbers to invest the valley. Instead, the task became guarding Route 611, the newly-hard topped road joining Gereshk and Sangin. Route 611 thus became a de facto frontline. As the majority of compounds straddling the route were abandoned, it became a particularly bloody frontline. The marines saturated the area with surveillance systems but the Ishaqzai sensed they were not going to be challenged and this encouraged brazen behaviour. The Upper Gereshk Valley became one of the few places in Helmand where the insurgents openly used 82mm mortars, 107mm recoilless rifles, and careered about in pick-up trucks with heavy machine guns. It was almost certain that Pakistanis were teaching the tribesmen how to use these weapons, often with good effect, against FOB Ouellette (in one fluke incident a rocket severed the cable of the surveillance balloon – it was retrieved by a helpful and amused police patrol). When the 1,000 odd US marines withdrew they handed over to a much smaller 300 strong British force. This was CF Burma and it had no chance of confronting the troublesome tribesmen - indeed, it did not even try.

Like the US marines before them, the British settled for keeping Route 611 open. An additional threat was the Barakzai-dominated southern half of the valley. This had

formerly been the fiefdom of Mir Wali's 93rd Division based in Gereshk. When the division was disbanded the soldiers became militiamen. It was these gunmen that 3 Para stumbled into in the summer of 2006 when they drove into the village of Zumbelay accompanied by the *Sunday Times* reporter Cristina Lamb. Over the next five years, a staggering forty clearance operations were conducted in this valley, to no avail. The tribesmen were still taking pot shots at the British. Ops Box Burma was finally handed over by the Scots Guards to the ANSF (in fact, to a more trustworthy ANCOP contingent) in December 2012. At the time, this valley was accounting for a stunning 11 per cent of all violent incidents in Afghanistan. The last British base in the area – FOB Ouellette – was finally handed over in September 2013. Brigadier Jones felt it politic to state that 'the handover of Patrol Base Ouellette is another indicator of the progress of the Afghan security forces', but this was far from the truth.[1117] The British only finally managed to extricate themselves after two attempts because the Afghan police refused to take over the dangerous base. The notion that withdrawal was 'conditions-based' was bunkum.

Unnoticed by commentators, the FCO quietly dropped tackling the opium poppy from the British menu of objectives. The ostensible reason why a British Task Force had been sent to Helmand proved a grand failure. Some generosity of spirit may be extended to Michael Ryder, the FCO official tasked with leading the program. It seems from the outset Ryder appreciated that 10 Downing Street had over-reached itself, but felt duty-bound to implement schemes that were doomed to fail. The reasons were, as ever, complex. Academics like David Mansfield with extensive field experience detailed the problems: government corruption, a lack of viable alternatives, token and misconceived Western aid programs, the persistence of the insurgency, and basic survival.[1118] His interviews with Helmand farmers offered a window into local attitudes. 'Fuck the government. They destroyed my crop,' one farmer told him in Lashkar Gah District. It could have been an epitaph for the entire project.[1119]

From 2006-2014 Helmand's farmers produced 26,154 metric tons of opium valued at $3.184 billion at farm gate prices.[1120] Interdiction never netted more than about 0.05 per cent of the annual opium production and eradication never exceeded more than about three per cent of the acreage under cultivation. In the last year of ISAF's presence, the now independent Afghan counter-narcotics agencies confiscated around eighteen tons of opium[1121] – Helmand alone had produced almost 3,000 tons. By withdrawal, eradication programs which had always been token efforts anyway, were virtually abandoned. In Helmand, in the last year of the British presence, just 787 hectares were eradicated, or 0.3

per cent of the total acreage. Britain was never able to offer a credible, long term counter-narcotics strategy. $100s millions were squandered by the FCO and others – the total figure is in the order of $10 billion – in counter-narcotics programs that were doomed to fail and which the British government had no intention of supporting beyond a nominal period. The much vaunted Helmand Food Zone, in the end, was a classic example of Western aid industry at its worst. This program actually only lasted three years and there was never any long-term intention to support Helmand's farmers with alternative, realistic revenue streams. Opium poppy cultivation did fall, significantly in some areas of central Nad-e Ali, but the main effects of the program were to displace opium poppy production north of the Nahr-e Bugra canal, in the dashte, and to increase corruption south of the canal within the food zone. By withdrawal, poppy cultivation had seeped back from the dashte and returned to the so-Helmand Food Zone. The much-vaunted 'agricultural park' south of Lashkar Gah, along with the $3 million cold storage facility in Gereshk, were abandoned and indeed never used.

There were some successes, which should be recognised. The British-trained counter-narcotics force, CF-333, proved an effective unit. In one swoop, 5.7 tonnes of heroin was seized, possibly a world record. In another raid, 236 tonnes of hashish was impounded. The hoary Haji Lal Jan Ishaqzai, one of Afghanistan's drug kingpins, finally had his day in court and received a twenty year sentence (in traditional fashion he bribed his way out of jail within a year). The corruption spread wide: many drug seizures were in fact deliberate operations mounted by the police to sell the drugs themselves. For all the flaws of the Helmand Food Zone, some credit is due to the British – it was the only such experiment in all Afghanistan.

But apart from personalities like David Mansfield, no one involved in this largely gross and predictable waste of British tax payers money, in the FCO or elsewhere, honestly and transparently reported the truth. In the last two years of the British presence in Helmand, opium cultivation actually hit record highs. In 2013, 209,000 hectares of the opium poppy were cultivated, the highest ever recorded, and Helmand accounted for 48 per cent of the total cultivation (Helmand production increased by 34 per cent, almost in synchronicity with the closure of British and American bases). There is no other possible judgement that can be made over the Blair government's decision to lead in counter-narcotics in Afghanistan – it was in the end a dismal failure. Individuals associated with this foolish decision, and its many fruitless programs, all prospered in their careers. Failure had many orphans.

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The British also gave up trying to influence Helmand politics. In the summer of 2012, an exhausted Gulab Mangal finally retired from the post of governor. If any single Afghan could be credited for saving Task Force Helmand from failure, it was the non-English speaking Mangal. His replacement was the rough General Mohammad Naeem Baluch, an NDS chief more in the style of the Soviet-era governors. Habibullah, who underpinned British success in Nad-e Ali, also went. It was alleged that he enjoyed links with the Taliban and he was charged with corruption. In his defence, he pointed out that it was thanks to his backdoor relationships with the Taliban that he had managed to keep the peace. Corruption in Helmand was a relative concept anyway. The new governor of Nad-e Ali, a youthful man named Ibrahim, turned out to be the nephew of the prosecutor who had secured Habibullah's sacking. The Nad-e Ali District Community Councils reacted with predictable coldness over these manoeuvrings and protested the loss of their former governor who was a genuinely popular figure. Behind all this, of course, was a scramble for declining Western contracts and reconstruction money. The wily Sher Akhundzada proved especially good at this game, securing a raft of lucrative jobs in northern Helmand and placing various relatives in key posts in Lashkar Gah. By the end of 2012, an Akhundzada had secured the posts of District Chiefs in Kajaki, Baghran (much to Baghrani's disgust, no doubt), and Washir in the south. His brother Amir in the meantime had been appointed governor of Uruzgan. It was a comprehensive check mate of the FCO officials who had rashly removed him from office in 2005.

There were setbacks on the path of withdrawal – there always are. In early March 2012, six soldiers were killed when their Warrior armoured personnel carrier struck a massive IED, late in the evening, at Durrai Junction on the border of Helmand and Kandahar Provinces. The force of the blast removed the turret and fellow soldiers were forced to stand guard and watch the macabre spectacle of the vehicle burning throughout the night. This incident happened at a particularly difficult time. Footage of US marines urinating on dead Taliban in Musa Qaleh; the accidental burning of Korans in Kabul; and the murder of sixteen Afghan civilians by an unbalanced US Army staff sergeant in Kandahar Province had all provoked the usual questioning of the point of the war. In America, a Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Davis provoked a storm by presenting a lengthy study to congressmen in which he effectively accused senior army officers of misleading the American public over the true state of the war. This report was forwarded in a particularly bad year for America's generals who were openly criticised in a number of books and articles. The authors could not have guessed that the year would end with Petraeus – now serving as

CIA chief – and General John Allen, Commander ISAF, facing the fallout of sex scandals, actual and alleged. Critics were quick to make historical comparisons. Vietnam-era generals, for all their faults, had the decency to die in battle – what was up with this new breed of techno-generals, so removed from front lines, and apparently with enough idle time on their hands to receive over 20,000 e-mails from secret female devotees? In Afghanistan, Karzai pronounced that all ISAF troops should withdraw from villages because they were doing more harm than good – a direct rejection of the doctrine of protecting the population on which ISAF had based its entire campaign.

In mid-September of the same year, a brazen attack against Camp Bastion left two US marines dead and eight AV-8B Harriers damaged or destroyed. Subsequent crowing on internet forums strongly suggested that the ISI had at least supported if not planned this assault. Bastion routinely hosted in the order of 200 aircraft. Somehow the insurgents had known exactly where the US marine aircraft were parked and only attacked these. The fallout from this incident proved controversial: two American generals were publicly humiliated and sacked, and a third was quietly removed from his post. On the British side, nobody was found to be responsible.

The Bastion attack coincided with two other events: widespread Muslim anger over a film posted on the internet deriding the Prophet Mohammed, and the arrival of Prince Harry on his second Helmand tour. There could only be empathy for Philip Hammond, a good defence secretary handed a rotten set of cards at the fag-end of a rotten war. Interviewed by the *Guardian* he offered an arresting perspective on the matter. ‘We didn’t come here to defeat the insurgency’ he conceded.[1122] Rather - and in a classic statement of the war’s domino theory - he asserted that British soldiers were in Afghanistan to prevent international terrorists from using the country as a base for operations. The illogic of the argument perfectly mirrored the illogic of the war. It could not be simultaneously true that Britain was succeeding in preventing extremists from using Afghanistan as a terrorist base, whether or not the task force won or lost against the insurgents. Or if this was the case, then why not get over with it quickly, ‘lose’, and get out? Why bother sacrificing one more life? What of the cardinal maxim of guerrilla warfare: ‘the guerrilla wins if he does not lose - the conventional army loses if it does not win’?[1123] The fact was that ISAF *did* have to defeat the insurgency, not just manage and control it as the defence secretary suggested, but none of these aims were achievable. Or find a political settlement, and this was not in the pack of cards either. Afghanistan was once again going to become a base for international terrorists whatever ISAF did, or perhaps not. It mattered little because the

war had become a sideshow. Muslim extremism had spread from Tunisia to Indonesia, and the epicentre had migrated to the tragedies unfolding in Syria and Iraq.

The fact was that ISAF had ultimately spent fourteen years fighting ‘non-wars’ against ‘non-terrorists’, as Cordesman put it. The West had slipped from chasing down al-Qaeda, to engaging in two ruinously misconceived exercises in armed nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Successive British governments had justified the war to the electorate on the grounds that it was critical to British domestic security. This argument could be challenged but not disproved as long as British soldiers remained in Afghanistan. With the withdrawal of the British task force the question could now be posed again with new rigour. If the government argument was right, was Britain now a more dangerous country because British soldiers were no longer fighting Pashtun tribesmen in south-west Afghanistan? Neither the Taliban nor al-Qaeda had been defeated. They were stronger. The absurdity of the proposition was self-evident to all except those determined to defend the notion that Helmand represented some sort of domino in the Global War of Terror – a British soldier dying in a street in Sangin was somehow keeping another Briton in a street in Surbiton, ‘safe’.

The crowning irony of a war justified by the repeated mantra that Afghanistan should no longer be a safe haven for al-Qaeda was that this is exactly what it became. In a twist that only a war of so many contradictions could produce, the relentless drone campaign over North Waziristan made life so intolerable for the remnants of the original al-Qaeda, a decision was taken to decamp back into Afghanistan – to Nuristan and Kunar Provinces – where it was safer.[1124] Now led by the Saudi Farouq al-Qahtani, Arab fighters began re-building camps in the deep ravines and conifer forests of Eastern Afghanistan, much like Osama bin Laden a quarter of a century previously. The wheel had turned full circle, to the embarrassment of ISAF that coyly referred to these fighters as ‘Arab elements’ rather than as al-Qaeda. To admit that al-Qaeda was back would have called into question the whole point of the last fourteen years of fighting. Neither can it be claimed that al-Qaeda affiliates were expelled from Afghanistan. Between 2007–2013, mostly American special force teams conducted at least 338 raids against the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Jihad Union, *Lashkar-e-Taiba*, the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan, *Hizb-i Islami Khalis*, and a mix of other foreign groups. The geographical spread of these raids was wide encompassing two thirds of Afghanistan’s provinces, and one quarter of its districts.[1125] The true number of such raids was much higher and does not take into

account operations against the Haqqani Network, another al-Qaeda ally. A freedom of information request for the location of British Reaper UAV operations (supporting special forces) revealed that they had in fact been mounted across Afghanistan. Eradicating the al-Qaeda weed was always going to prove an impossible task. Without the full cooperation of the Pakistani government, which was never going to be granted, the West ultimately faced disappointment. Continued covert backing from Saudi and Gulf State Arabs just compounded the problem.

The MOD's problems managing the 'narrative' of the unwinding war did not end there. At the height of the summer of 2012, Green-on-Blue or 'insider attacks' created a mood of semi-hysteria in Western media, and great anger in Washington. By the time of withdrawal in October 2014, these attacks had claimed 161 lives and wounded 251.[1126]

ISAF figures showed that from May 2007 there had been eighty-four insider attacks, of which just over half had been perpetrated in 2012. These had resulted in 123 killed and 169 wounded ISAF soldiers and contractors. The 2012 figures that caused the uproar were sixty killed and ninety-four wounded. These latter attacks had been carried out by fifty-five shooters, of whom twenty-two had managed to escape. Only eleven attackers survived and just one was a confirmed case of Taliban infiltration. The figures caused anger because insider attacks were now accounting for a significant proportion of all ISAF fatalities. In 2010, 3 per cent of ISAF fatalities had been due to such attacks. By 2011, the number had doubled to 6 per cent, and in 2012 a totally unacceptable 21 per cent of all Western fatalities were being caused by insider attacks. American ire over this issue was palpable and understandable: 63 per cent of all attacks had been directed against American soldiers (14 per cent were against British soldiers).

In 2008 there had been two attacks against British troops. The following year the number jumped to eight, and in 2010 there were twelve. By 2012, Green-on-Blue attacks had become a significant issue. One quarter of all British fatalities were the result of these fratricidal attacks. By the end this year, fourteen servicemen and one woman, Corporal Channing Day, had been killed by rogue Afghan policemen or soldiers. Despite claims by the Taliban that these incidents were part of an orchestrated campaign, the evidence suggested multifarious reasons behind the phenomenon. In the majority of cases, ISAF had no idea what was behind the attacks because the killer died. A very small percentage was confidently attributed to Taliban infiltration. A larger percentage appeared to be provoked by petty arguments, stress and misunderstandings. Cultural disrespect was not a great factor, although Afghans never ceased to be dismayed by the pervasiveness of swearing in the

British Army. One of the biggest causes of friction, paradoxically, was frustration over the British withdrawal. After six years, the ANSF had become a dependent force. 'Kit envy' – as it was called - had become widespread. Now the cussing Brits were off, and taking all the shiny gear with them. Grabbing as much kit as possible from the departing Westerners, whether for military purposes, or to sell off in markets, became a sort of obsession amongst Afghan soldiers and policemen. When Afghans complained about their British mentors, 'kit envy', not cultural issues, almost always rose to the top. Afghans had seen and now wanted the better life, a desire that would manifest itself in mass migration after ISAF's withdrawal.

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There is no question that ordinary Afghans were impressed with Western technology, and sometimes ascribed magical powers to all the gizmos. On one occasion, after a hand-held UAV crashed in a field, locals tied it to a tree with a length of string, as if it was bird that might fly away again. On another, a Grenadier Guards officer recalled, 'Not much changed from day to day, that was until the PIVOT camera system was set up on our roof. The ANCOP thought it was brilliant and it would be a great asset but I had to explain that not all white heat sources were Taliban, either that or we were in big trouble!' The policemen seemed to disbelieve the officer and began to mount arrests, 'solely on the basis of random white heat sources on a screen'. Even after re-explaining that the camera was not 'a magic ISAF Taliban spotter', the policemen persisted. 'I had a feeling,' the officer philosophically concluded, 'that I was getting a reputation among the ANCOP of not being much fun'.[1127]

Notwithstanding the damaging psychological effects of Green-on-Blue attacks, they had no effect on the British timetable for withdrawal. Every day, there were hundreds of interactions between British and Afghan soldiers and policemen, as well as with the hundreds of locally employed Afghans at major bases like Bastion. They were all benign. Afghans themselves were embarrassed by the attacks and emphasised that they stood *shonha ba shonha* (shoulder to shoulder) with their British allies. This was a genuine and heartfelt sentiment. By 2013, the furore over Green-on-Blue attacks had died down. There were just thirteen such attacks, resulting in fourteen deaths. In that year, ISAF suffered only 162 fatalities, including 24 British soldiers, a dramatic 62 per cent collapse from the previous year. In stark contrast, 2,767 Afghan soldiers were killed, up from 1,870 in the previous year.[1128]

The last two years of the war also witnessed successes, too easily forgotten in the broader narrative of withdrawal. Perhaps the most exciting organisational development of

the war for the British was the evolution of the Brigade Reconnaissance Force (BRF) as a modern-day successor to the wartime Long Range Desert Group (LRDG). This had been Brigadier Jerry Thomas's original vision and it came to fruition.[1129] Much like the wartime LRDG, the BRF rivalled the special force contingent in the tempo and effectiveness of its operations. The key to the BRF was that it was practising mobile warfare, not static, attrition warfare. On Operation Herrick 12, the BRF had mounted sixteen operations. Over the next two rotations, the number jumped from twenty to forty-nine deliberate operations. Working with better intelligence, the BRF accounted for over half of all cached IEDs found by the task force, and four fifths of all homemade explosive finds (an accumulated total of six tonnes, or enough to make a staggering 900 IEDs). The BRF also accounted for the largest number of detentions. By the winter of 2012, the momentum of this impressive unit had become unstoppable. Led by Queen's Dragoons Guards Major Justin Stenhouse, the BRF mounted seventy operations, killed or captured twenty-nine insurgents and facilitators, and seized 1.6 tonnes of homemade explosives.[1130] In one hectic period, the unit mounted four aviation assaults on the trot. Stenhouse was awarded the Distinguished Service Order but with modesty commented 'I just did my job', preferring to give all the credit to his soldiers. As the British withdrawal gathered pace, brigade commanders came to increasingly rely on the BRF to mount mobile operations and keep emboldened insurgents on the back foot.

The last major British military operations were curiously reminiscent of the tactics used at the beginning of the war. Some areas had never been cleared or secured, however many times the British 'mowed the lawn'. In the spring of 2012, a 1,000 strong joint British-Afghan force swept through the Upper Gereshk Valley for the umpteenth time. The operation was called Now Ruz ('New Day'). The finds were undoubtedly significant: seven bomb-making factories, forty-four IEDs, eighteen mines and twelve directional fragmentation charges.[1131] But did this amount to a new day, or just another day in this troubled and hostile valley?

Courage was not lacking either in these sunset days of the war. On 22 March 2013, Acting Lance-Corporal Tuljung Gurung was manning a sentry tower at PB Sparta in the early hours of the morning. Two assailants attacked the soldier, shooting him in the helmet and knocking him down 'semi-conscious'. When he recovered from the blow he noticed a grenade had been posted into his position. He desperately managed to toss the grenade just as it detonated, knocking him down for a second time. By now one of the attackers had managed to climb into the tower. Unable to reach for his rifle, Gurung leapt on the man

and both fell out of tower, landing heavily. Then, in traditional fashion, the Gurkha reached for his kukri and whacked the insurgent, sending both packing. For this gritty resistance, Gurung was awarded the Military Cross.[1132] Nerves and cool professionalism won Warrant Officer Andreas Peat a George Cross when he found himself attempting to extricate a group of Danish and Afghan soldiers trapped on a roof, littered with IEDs. One Danish soldier had already been mortally wounded. But underneath his failing body were wires leading to a second IED which was likely to detonate if the soldier was moved. Peat successfully disarmed the device and led the rest of the shaken group to safety. Unusually, a Queen's Gallantry Medal was won at the end of the war by a soldier serving with the Royal Army Veterinary Corps, a Corporal Edward Davis.

There were also belated attempts to win 'hearts and minds' – belated because the British were off and it did not really matter anymore whether or not Afghan farmers warmed to their Western military neighbours. This did not undermine the sincerity and good will demonstrated by individuals like Flight Lieutenant Sttevai Atalla. Blessed with a winning smile, Atalla worked as a Stabilisation Officer in an MSST attached to Delhi Company, 1 Yorks (Prince of Wales' Own).[1133] At first she found it difficult to overcome the suspicions of local farmers. Then, as she described it: 'Slowly people started to come to us, first the children then the adults; they would have tea with us'. Over five months, 'the local people became fond of me; they called me 'Guwette' which means 'desert flower'. They started handing in IEDs because they were concerned for my safety'. A small victory had been won in a corner of Helmand. Flight Lieutenant Atalla was awarded the Queen's Commendation for Valuable Service for this work.

With one year to go before the official end of the ISAF mission, around eighty per cent of over 800 bases in Afghanistan had been handed over to Afghans. Shutting down the Lashkar Gah PRT involved packing 1,400 computers and ten miles of cables. At the height of the British 'boots on the ground' there had been around 200 patrol bases and check points. The majority had already been either abandoned, or deliberately destroyed. By the beginning of 2014, in Nad-e Ali and Nahr-e Saraj, Afghan security forces now maintained a presence in just thirty odd patrol bases. This raised an important question. What had been the point of the Petraean strategy of Clear-Hold-Build which the British task force had dutifully followed? British sappers had expended 100,000s of man hours erecting a matrix of posts which the Afghans had already abandoned, a full twelve months before the British were due to leave. What had been cleared? What had been held? What purpose had all this effort served? Too many of these had represented transient posts, quickly

circumvallated by IEDs, where a British soldier eventually left behind a leg, or his life. Had it been worth it? If the British had followed a mobile, intelligence-led, targeted approach to counter-insurgency, rather than allowing themselves to be dispersed and mired in static, attrition warfare, would they have paid such a high price?

Withdrawal also brought with it the only war crime case recorded in Task Force Helmand. This involved a marine Sergeant Alexander Blackman who shot a badly wounded insurgent rather than offering medical assistance. Fascinatingly, the self-rationalisation Blackman invoked – that this was exactly how a wounded marine would have been treated by the Taliban – was the same defence deployed 131 years previously in a similar case in Kabul. In this earlier incident, soldiers of the Seaforth Highlanders (then 72nd Highlanders) were accused of setting light to two wounded Afghan fighters, a story scandalously reported in *The Civil and Military Gazette*.[1134] A Dr Bourke then intervened and ordered the two men to be shot, judging that 'life was extinct or practically so…' After some investigation it transpired that soldiers from 5 Goorkhas had in fact been implicated. In their defence, the commanding officer explained 'his men must have thought the Afghans were dead; he denies that his men would torture the living but admits the possibility of the dead body of a Mohamedan being set on fire by his men as an act of retribution for the mutilations and indignities which their wounded and killed suffer when they fall into the hands of the Mohamedans'. Lord Roberts had high regard if not affection for his Gurkhas, rating them the best of the native troops, but he nonetheless set up a Court of Inquiry and subsequently raised the allegations to the Army Headquarters in India. Sergeant Blackman received a life sentence for murder, but it appears that the case against 5 Goorkhas was eventually discontinued. In a footnote, an apocryphal tale circulated in Helmand in 2011 that a Gurkha patrol returned to base with the head of an insurgent, offering the explanation that carrying the body back for identification purposes had proved too difficult. To date, this just remains a good story.

On the civilian side, the merry-go-round of civil servant appointments continued to match the rapid rotations of generals. In the spring of 2012, Sir Christopher Patey handed over to Simon Gass, Britain's fifth ambassador in Kabul since 2006. He in turn handed over to Sir Richard Stagg the following year. Trying to keep count of the number of DfID officials that transited through Afghanistan over the same period became a losing game. This latter organisation ended the war as it started – poorly. In 2011, it published its Afghanistan 'Operational Plan 2011-2015', a document of wishful thinking, misleading statistics, and meaningless targets, the latter a great obsession of British government

departments over this period.

Under ‘Peace, Security and Political Stability’ it stated that 78 per cent of Afghans believed their provincial government was doing a good or very good job. DfID’s target would be to ‘contribute to an increase’ in this percentage by 2015. Setting aside how anyone could possibly measure whether or not DfID contributed to such an increase, if it happened, this was a gross simplification of the complexities facing local governance in Afghanistan’s provinces. The number actually came from the 2010 annual *Asia Foundation Survey*, a 150 page document with thousands of data. DfID was creating a ‘target’ based on a single datum point, extracted from a thick report with hundreds of graphs. It was nonsense in other words: the intractable problem of governance in Afghanistan reduced to a customer satisfaction survey. The overwhelming majority of rural Afghans had no experience of provincial government. Their lives were governed by *khans* or *maliks*, local strong men, or insurgents. It was well known that polled Afghans frequently gave interviewers the answers they believed you wanted to hear. If you were asked whether you thought the provincial government was doing a good job, you were likely to assume that the person asking was associated with the local government, and expected a positive answer.

In another section, DfID set itself the target of creating 200,000 jobs by 2015. Again, how could anyone possibly measure or prove this? Nobody could. Around 400,000 young men were entering the labour market *every year*. The unemployment rate was in the order of 40 per cent and GDP per capita was one of the lowest in the world (215th). Few Afghans outside the large towns had ‘jobs’. They had multiple and contingent income streams, as numerous studies showed. Some were licit and some were not. For most Afghans, it was just about daily survival. Setting such a target was asinine.

Perhaps the most misleading statistic of all was the precise figure of 211,900 children enrolled in primary schools by 2015. Astonishingly, this number was derived by dividing the number of children the Kabul government aimed to enrol in schools, by DfID’s contribution to the proportion of total ARTF funds (the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund), and other non-ARTF funding allocated to education. The ARTF was an embezzled and wasteful fund. Taking an Afghan government stated goal as a starting point for anything was like consulting a mafia boss on orphan care. DfID had no clue how many children were actually enrolled in primary schools because no DfID officials actually visited schools. These were numbers plucked from the air and crunched through a meaningless formula. Roughly half of Afghanistan’s claimed schools did not actually

exist. Four fifths of girls were chucked out at sixth grade without anything that might be described as an education. A third of Afghanistan's districts had no female teachers such was conservative Pashtun resistance to the notion of educated women. The majority of Afghan children left primary school functionally illiterate. How did that stack up against DfID's list of 'positive indicators'? And so it went on, with the usual management platitudes: 'delivery', 'partnership agreements', 'value for money', 'portfolios', and 'action points'. It was a sorry end to a bleak chapter.

Self-deluding mantras drained with the dwindling funds. At the beginning of the war, FCO and DfID officials had alighted in backward provinces like Helmand with notions of 'doing good' for Afghan women (the same types who imagined that showing David Attenborough nature programs to Gereshk elders might solve a few problems). Over a five year period, DfID alone spent £463,942 on female empowerment in Afghanistan.[1135] It was lucrative work for gender equality consultants but what good came of this expenditure? Perhaps the verdict can be safely left with a House of Commons research library report, published as Britain prepared to withdraw. The author, Ben Smith, had either not been briefed on 'delivering the message', or decided that telling the truth mattered more:[1136]

'The situation for women in Helmand province is particularly difficult. As one of the most conservative regions, women are almost entirely absent from public life outside the provincial capital; there are no prominent women politicians, community leaders, businesswomen and no female judges or lawyers. In Sangin district, no women registered to vote in the Presidential election in 2009. The transfer of daughters as a means of settling disputes is still prevalent in some districts and there is no provision for safety for women or girls fleeing violence. Harmful cultural practices, such as forced and early marriage, are endemic across the province.

Girls' education is minimal. In Nawa district, no girls go to school. Maternal mortality is amongst the highest in the world while women's literacy in Helmand stands at around five per cent. Health provision for women is minimal, with very few women doctors or nurses and no consistent, free, midwifery service. The absence of women from public life, including decision-making at provincial, district and community levels, means that women are not in a position to advocate change in areas that affect their lives, such as education, health, trade, land and housing.'

The tragedy, of course, was that Western interference led to deaths. In the summer of 2013, Lashkar Gah's token police woman chief, a character frequently held up as a

‘success story’ when government spin doctors needed to trot off some empty claim of progress, was gunned down on her way to work. Her two successors similarly followed her to an early grave.

Just as Pacification in the Vietnam War generated a raft of false claims, so these programs produced dishonest success statistics. In 2014, wary of a media that was preparing to question the point of the war, the government published online ‘The Story of the UK’s work in Afghanistan’.[1137] This document was riddled with misleading and untruthful assertions. It was claimed, for example, that 260 kilometres of hard-topped roads had been built in Helmand in the previous year. This would have been some achievement for a contractor in a developed country with modern infrastructure. In the backwater of Helmand, at war, it was totally implausible. Over the entire eight year British presence, roads were built from Lashkar Gah to Nad-e-Ali, with two subsidiary roads west to Shin Kalay and north to the Nahr-e Bugra canal; from Lashkar Gah to Chah-e Anjir (Route Morpheus); and from Chah-e-Anjir to Gereshk (Route Trident). The Americans also hard-topped Route 611 from Sangin to Kajaki. With some minor sections added elsewhere, this amounted to less than 100 kilometres. Where the figure of ‘260’ came from was a mystery, or perhaps a fiction. It was also claimed that eighty-nine schools had been built. This was simply untrue. The British refurbished one school in Musa Qaleh, and one in Sangin near the District Centre. No attempts were made to build schools in the Sangin or Upper Gereshk Valleys or in Now Zad and Kajaki – it would have been a quite impossible task. In Nad-e Ali, in 2013, just six permanent structure schools had been built, but the British were hoping to add another five before leaving. There were no secondary schools for girls at all in Nad-e Ali, despite the many claims that education for girls had improved. The only meaningful schools for girls in Helmand were in Lashkar Gah and Gereshk. They pre-dated the arrival of the British (built by the Americans during Helmand’s golden period), and contrary to myth, they were not closed down by the Taliban. The British hoped to persuade tribesmen in two villages – Luy Bagh and Hazara Kalay – to start up schools for girls, but this was the sum of the ambition. ‘The Story of the UK’s work in Afghanistan’ compounded these false claims by simultaneously asserting that 30,000 girls were now attending school in Helmand. Just one month after the publication of this document, the Nad-e Ali governor was informing *Pajhwok* news that in fact there were 3,500 school girls in the district.

What these assertions and statistics revealed was a culture of endemic, casual falsehoods, not tangible achievement. An organisation like DfID could spout pleasing

numbers, safe in the knowledge that no parliamentary select committee would ever uncover the truth. To invoke Cordesman's phrase, Helmand had indeed become a liar's contest.

Britain, to be just, was not sailing alone on this ship of fools. The failures of reconstruction were comprehensively described by the Afghanistan Analysts Network in a series of essays, *Snapshots of an Intervention*, published on the eve of 2012 Tokyo Conference. The detail in this book was fascinating, but perhaps the foreword said it all:

'Years of following the international efforts had left us with an increasingly strong sense of déjà vu: another conference to demonstrate momentum, another strategy to surpass the ones before, another project that would come and go and be forgotten the moment its progress was no longer being reported on, only to resurface in a new guise a little later…the short rotations and limited mobility of embassy and donor agency staff, the pressures to spend and deliver and to come up with project-sized solutions for complex problems, the tendency to design programmes by brainstorm, the lack of institutional memory…money and opportunity were being wasted in an overwhelming manner…'

The consequence of this massive Western failure and mendacity over the true state of Afghanistan was paid for by the Afghan people who 'were left empty-handed, with promises of security, stability and reconstruction unmet'. In this respect, Tokyo did not disappoint. This conference achieved a sort of baroque of meaningless slogans, false promises couched in technical jargon, pledges that were never going to be fulfilled, and unrealistic targets. For Kabul, the vital outcome was continued international (American) funding for the security forces, for a further three years, following ISAF's withdrawal – or as long as Soviet funding lasted.

Task Force Helmand was withdrawing, but the British Army was conducting a more dramatic withdrawal at home and the man leading this melancholy retreat was the defence secretary. Philip Hammond came with a reputation for chilly precision: 'Forensic Phil'. This did not do justice to a personality with a wry sense of humour. Unlike many ministers, Hammond never fell into the trap of being seen 'to do something'. His calculated and sensible prevarication was his imprimatur. If he wasn't sure, he stopped, gathered more facts, and gathered more facts again. He avoided rising to every media bait, and when he spoke it was with authority and good sense. This was just the medicine the MOD needed. The media had widely reported a £36 billion black hole in the Ministry's finances inherited from the previous government. In fact, as Hammond revealed, the true figure was closer to £74 billion when taking into account manpower costs, the need to cut the defence budget,

and his own government's equipment and support liabilities. The inherited black hole, while deeply unwelcome, amounted to less than half of the problem. In other words, even if the Labour government had passed on a balanced budget, there would still have been cuts, though not as severe. In this respect, the Labour government's financial mismanagement of the defence budget was a political gift behind which the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government was able to carry out its cuts, while blaming the last mob. They were, in either case, necessarily deep.

The army lost twenty-three major units and 20,000 men – the biggest loss of manpower since *Options for Change 1991*. This implied that it was Conservative and not Labour governments that were chiefly responsible for running down Britain's armed forces in the modern period. Cap badges were saved but this masked the fact that historic names dropped from the roll call. These included the Green Howards (2 Yorks), the Staffords (3 Mercians), the Royal Welsh Fusiliers (2 Royal Welsh), and 9/12 Lancers. The manner in which all the Scottish regiments were saved by re-roling the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders as a ceremonial company caused some mutterings: one in five 'Scottish' soldiers was in fact a Fijian, suggesting that this decision had been politically motivated to deflect the Scottish Nationalist Party. Was there really any point to re-naming 19 Regiment Royal Artillery, the Scottish Gunners, when Australians, South Africans and any number of other nationalities including Sassenachs might serve in the unit? The Welsh were left with two major units and the keen Ulstermen, who could easily have supported several battalions, were left with one (not counting the untouchable Irish Guards). This was not the only anomaly. Logically, the five battalion-strong 'super-regiment', the Rifles, should have been cut. When this regiment was created, there was criticism that the amalgamation of the Light Infantry and Royal Green Jackets had been unnecessary. The critics were proved right. This super-regiment grew like Gulliver (one in four army cadets were being hoovered into the Rifles). Cutting flush Rifle battalions could not be justified, so the army now found itself with this single large infantry regiment dwarfing all others and getting bigger, while having to cut smaller regiments like the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, causing protests.

News of cutbacks overshadowed an unremarked milestone in June 2012. In this month, for the first time, the British did not suffer a single combat fatality in Helmand. Intriguingly, the Defence Secretary dropped hints in the following month that the withdrawal might be accelerated and completed by the end of 2013. The rhetoric of staying until the job was done was fast being overtaken by the reality of the American

partner pulling out early. The last thing Cameron needed in 2014 was a small and isolated British force in Helmand, without the back-up of Task Force Leatherneck. If Obama was quitting, so was he.

By the time North Americans tramped to voting booths in November 2012, their incumbent president was already heading for the Afghan exit door. As Defense Secretary Robert Gates put it before he left office: 'Let's not kid ourselves. We are the only ones paying for this in any significant way'.[1138] With a $16 trillion deficit and faced with a looming 'fiscal cliff' in the New Year, chucking more money into the Afghan black hole was as welcome as having teeth pulled.

From 2001-2011, America had spent over $51 billion in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. This was already a greater sum than was disbursed in Vietnam. The breakdown was $18 billion spent on 'economic aid' and $32 billion spent on 'military aid'.[1139] Other donor countries had spent in the order of $10 billion (from a total of about three times this sum pledged). Total American spend on the war in Afghanistan through to 2012 had been $557 billion.[1140] Operation Enduring Freedom had transmuted from Rumsfeld's bargain campaign in the winter of 2001, into the most profligate war in American history. Fighting a war in a land-locked, semi-medieval country was always bound to be expensive, particularly as the major land supply route was a tortuous 1,300 mile trek through Pakistan. But the modern American armed forces made it even more so by their addictions to comforts and expensive technologies. Nobody, it was quipped during the Vietnam War, built bases like the Americans. Forty years later this truism multiplied several fold.

The many problems with US spending (DOD, State and USAID) were well documented by organisations like the CSIS.[1141] The chief problem was that the majority of total spending was allocated *after* 2009, when the war was unravelling. By the time this pipeline of money began to gush, withdrawal and cuts were underway. The poor timing of the financial bullet was compounded by uneven disbursement. Only around 60 per cent of appropriated aid funds were obligated, and perhaps 45 per cent actually disbursed. This still amounted to an 'incredible' amount of money ($640 billion by 2012). The three government departments then sprayed Afghanistan with dollars, with an abandon that became its own justification. The success metric became how much money you could burn, and how quickly. But spending was not building, and stopping spending was not solving, as Cordesman put it.[1142]

With so much money sloshing about, ‘manic’ levels of corruption were bound to become a problem. The answer, as ever, was to set up more organisations and more committees. Completely ineffectual bodies like the High Office for Oversight of Anti-Corruption, the Anti-Corruption Tribunal, the Major Crimes Task Force, and the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Committee, only served to add another pot of biddable officials to the mix. Private sector firms and blue chip accountancy firms charging millions for their services proved equally useless. The only organisation that emerged with any credibility from this fiasco was the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). By the end of the war, SIGAR’s quarterly reports had become the last beacons of truthful reporting amidst the dishonest babble in the bazaars.

ISAF employed around 11,000 contractors, with a much smaller number of foreign firms accounting for the bulk of the funding. Contractor fraud was a serious issue. One of the largest of the American contractors was forced to admit in court that it had been submitting ‘false, fictitious and fraudulent overhead rates’.[1143] The number of documented tales of shoddy building construction became legion: ISAF was leaving behind a legacy of buildings and other structures many of which would become derelicts because they were poorly built in the first place and could not be maintained. The same was true of the many roads ISAF built. A police station that became a chicken coop was just one of many such examples. In the first half of the war, contracting mainly benefited the old warlords. In the second half, the Taliban become recipients of recycled aid money (by demanding a cut from local contractors in what amounted to a national protection racket).

Service fraud also became a problem. For the British, this remained a hidden problem because there was no organisation investigating corrupt officers and soldiers. American servicemen had to dodge SIGAR, a tough proposition.[1144] To give a sense of the scale of this fraud, by the winter of 2011, SIGAR was pursuing 111 investigations, sixty-eight involving procurement and contract fraud. There had been seven convictions, nine indictments and fourteen arrests.[1145] Cases included an army staff sergeant who stole $210,000 in Kandahar; an army captain who solicited over $1 million in bribes in Kunar Province; and two army sergeants who also solicited bribes of $200,000 from a trucking company. By the beginning of 2014, the number of investigations had risen to 318.[1146] How many got away with such nefarious activities will never be known. When an attempt was made to audit the provision of fuel to the ANSF – a well-known racket – it was discovered that five years’ worth of records had been burnt, not by Afghans, but by

American service archivists. All SIGAR could do was protest to Congress over this blatant destruction of potentially embarrassing records.

These manifold problems were well known to American lawmakers. In the summer of 2011, in anticipation of the imminent announcement of America's withdrawal from Afghanistan, the most comprehensive study into American aid to Afghanistan was presented to the Senate.[1147] It made awful reading. Not counting CERP funds, the bill for raising Afghan security forces, and counter-narcotics, America had donated $18.8 billion in aid to a country that remained 'terminally sick'. Indeed, Afghanistan had sucked more American aid money than any other country in the world, including Iraq. This was a disastrous return on such a massive investment. In a laconic observation, the report noted that 'the unintended consequences of pumping large amounts of money into a war zone cannot be underestimated'. Belatedly, the need to build up 'Afghan capacity' was recognised – an argument that DfID had championed from the beginning – but this was facing insurmountable problems, not least that every serious initiative inevitably sucked in more Western experts, creating further dependencies. DfID had a case but was dishonest, never reporting the scale of the challenge and instead falling back on a routine of empty success statistics to demonstrate progress. When American investigators opened the box, it was found to be empty. Dispiritingly, the report also found that there was little evidence that massive aid spend was proving a successful mechanism for achieving stability on the front lines in southern and eastern Afghanistan. If fighting your way to victory was unrealistic, spending your way to victory seemed equally doomed to failure. The illogic of aid was sometimes self-defeating: an Afghan teacher was earning $100 a month; the Afghan driver ferrying the Western expert who set up the school was earning $1,000. Western countries were almost entirely sustaining the Afghan government and civil service, distorting the economy and introducing a raft of perverse incentives. The report concluded that future aid had to be 'necessary, achievable and sustainable', but everyone had been repeating similar mantras for the last ten years, while irresponsibly wasting billions of dollars.

An organisation like International Crisis Group was similarly damning in its verdict.[1148] Around $57 billion had been disbursed in aid since 2002, it claimed, from a total pledge of $90 billion. Half of this amount had been swallowed by the Afghan security forces. An unquantifiable amount had been dissipated in short term and unsustainable projects. Truck-loads of funds had simply left the country as quickly as they entered the opaque and pilfered accounts of Kabul Bank.

In a final, spasmodic fit of national masochism, the independent and bipartisan US Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan finally concluded a three year investigation into where all the dollars had gone (no such effort was undertaken in Britain and probably never will be). Who knows what makes the jaw of the average senator drop, but surely these sentences had an effect:

'At least $31 billion, and possibly as much as $60 billion, has been lost to contract waste and fraud in America's contingency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Much more will turn into waste as attention to continuing operations wanes, and U.S. support for projects and programs in Iraq and Afghanistan declines, and as those efforts are revealed as unsustainable.'

British MPs were only saved reading a similar paragraph on British aid because, for political reasons it may be surmised, no inquiry was launched to investigate the significant scale of losses incurred by DfID in Afghanistan.

The majority of aid funds had bypassed the Afghan government in favour of international institutions and private companies. In this respect, the patient had almost been incidental to the blood transfusion. This aid had been administered by staffs experiencing a yearly 85 per cent turnover rate.[1149] It was not just the military that could be accused of short-term attitudes: virtually every foreigner in Afghanistan ticked off the days.

Bypassing the Afghan government had been both a forced and deliberate decision: forced because the national ministries did not have the staffs, expertise or systems to handle large budgets or programs; and deliberate from a reluctance to pour money into corrupt black holes with poor or no oversight. Afghanistan did not lack civil servants. According to the Finance Minister and later President, Ashraf Ghani, the international community had been paying a monthly salary of $25 dollars to 240,000 civil servants. How many actually existed, or performed any meaningful function, was anyone's guess.

As in Vietnam, everyone agreed that standing up credible and reasonably competent Afghan National Security Forces was fundamental to the success of the war. American funding for the Afghan Security Forces Fund (ASFF) was $9.2 billion.[1150] Other ISAF countries were contributing just $100 million dollars.[1151] Funding for police salaries was via the Law and Order Trust Fund Afghanistan (LOTFA). Over eight years the international community had provided $1.74 billion dollars to this fund, just under half the amount disbursed by Washington.[1152] It was thanks to American largesse that the ANSF

had vehicles and weapons that worked (a $530 million maintenance contract), and buildings in which to sit (a whopping $6.7 billion dollar infrastructure spend).[1153] The financial imbalance between America and the allies was huge.

Dependence on US funding was embarrassingly stark in provinces like Helmand. Gold did finally pour into Helmand, but it had been an American gold rush. Over 2010-2011 (the same year that British military commanders saw their funds reduced by 90 per cent), more than $500 million was committed to reconstruction in the province.[1154] About half of this pot was allocated to the Commanders' Emergency Response Program (CERP) – US marines effectively led the rebuilding of Helmand. A problem with CERPs, well recognised and debated, was that it amounted to providing funds for unsustainable projects to buy (or bribe) some local peace. An absence of gunfire could not be lightly dismissed, but equally it did not represent a long term development strategy. Nonetheless, by 2012, around 16,000 CERP projects had been completed across Afghanistan, costing over $2 billion. As this was money mostly injected directly into the local economy, without the intervention of corrupt Afghan officials or shameless Western consultant 'experts' all taking their cuts, it did benefit recipients in immediate ways. With the imminent withdrawal of Task Force Leatherneck and USAID, reconstruction funds would plummet. Boom would likely turn to bust. A not insignificant proportion of this Western money in Helmand was diverted to the Taliban. After the opium trade, it was assessed that Western aid money had in fact become the second-biggest income source for the very enemy the ISAF was trying to defeat.[1155] Unsurprisingly, some Taliban gangs took to attacking American bases in the forlorn hope of persuading the soldiers to remain longer in Helmand. With the loss of these income streams, the conditions for a flourishing insurgency and criminality would return. None of this was ever declared in the quarterly progress reports delivered by the foreign secretary to Parliament.

The central dilemma facing all donor countries was when, if ever, would the Afghan government start paying its way? As many commentators pointed out, there were several overlapping economies in Afghanistan. The largest was the aid economy. In this respect, nothing had changed since the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. This was amplified by the war economy – the great superstructure of lucrative contracts, rackets, embezzlement and corruption provoked by the presence of Western military forces and civilian contractors. This market alone was worth $13 billion a year according to US State Department estimates. Running behind these in a close third position was the narco-economy. Ordinary Afghans commonly flitted between these economies lured by whoever

paid best. Trailing in a very distant fourth place was the licit economy. The problem with this four-state economic model was that the two front-runners were about to quit the race, leaving Afghanistan as a two horse race between the narco-economy and the licit economy. In 2011, all the smart money was on a clear victory for the narcotics barons and their associates, the Taliban. The US Treasury calculated that cuts in Western defence and aid spend would likely reduce Afghanistan's GDP by between 12 per cent in the best case and 40 per cent in the worst case.

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In 2010-2011, the World Bank assessed that total Afghan government spend on the core and external budgets was $17.1 billion, of which $15.7 billion was Western aid money.[1156] From this lump of aid money, $1.9 billion contributed to the core budget of $3.3 billion. Domestic revenue (that is, money raised by the Afghan government) accounted for just under half of the core budget, and about ten per cent of GDP. This accorded with the World Bank's overall assessment that *97 per cent* of Afghanistan's GDP was derived from foreign military and development spend. Leaving aside the unique case of the Palestinian Authority and Gaza, no other Third World recipient was so dependent on Western aid. Operation Enduring Freedom and the complimentary ISAF mission had created a quite unprecedented Frankenstein. The Afghan government had no reasonable expectation of funding its budget commitments before Transition in 2014, or for the foreseeable future, without massive injections of Western funds. In 2013, the Afghan government succeeding in raising $2 billion through taxes, or a quarter of what it needed.[1157] The situation was hopeless.

The same problem of insolvency beset the Soviet-supported government in the 1980s. The pre-war government had been solvent and not reliant on foreign aid. By 1991, with Afghanistan wrecked by war, over 70 per cent of government revenues were derived from Soviet aid.[1158] When the former Soviet Union broke up the aid was terminated and the collapse of the Afghan government swiftly followed. Soviet economic aid, per capita, actually exceeded Western aid. From 1980-89, Soviet aid (converted in 2007 dollars) totalled $29.7 billion or $1,980 per capita. Western aid from 2002-2009 totalled $44.4 billion or $1,346 per capita.[1159]

A comparison with the Soviet experience also revealed the same pattern of military funding. From 1980-1985 military spend roughly doubled. The Soviet surge in the second half of the war, the build-up of Afghan security forces, and the final withdrawal provoked

a massive increase in military spend, as it did in ISAF's war. The Soviet 'surge' was successful: the Russian Army did not 'lose the war' as popularly depicted. How could the increase in financial firepower not have an effect? But it amounted to military boom and bust. The military funding was unsustainable and its main legacy was the ensuing civil war and the thousands of tons of weapons and ammunition that ISAF would subsequently encounter thirteen years later. In 2011 it was estimated that the planned 379,000 ANSF would cost $7.2-9 billion per year to fund.[1160] This was expected to include a $2.7 billion 'iron mountain' of 22,000 vehicles, 40,000 weapons, forty-four aircraft and helicopters, and ammunition. Since 2004, the DOD had in fact supplied over 747,000 weapons and auxiliary equipment to the ANSF, valued at $636 million.[1161] This was the largest delivery of weaponry in modern Afghan history.[1162] At the time of the withdrawal there was an astonishing dump of 475,753 weapons, 98,495 vehicles, 206,226 radios, and 55,125 items of IED detection equipment – all thanks to American largesse.[1163] A good proportion of this weaponry had already vanished into the armoury which was Afghanistan. It was an open question whether it would share the same fate as the Soviet arms packages and end up in the hands of militias. Over the same period, the Iraqi Army, which received an even larger weapons and equipment package from Washington, had just collapsed in the face of lightly armed insurgents. In South Vietnam, the Americans left behind over a million men at arms and the fourth largest air force in the world. Within two years, Hanoi's boys wiped them.

Post–Chicago 2012, the ambition was revised downwards, but even a trimmed ANSF was assessed to cost $4.2-4.5 billion annually. With some deftness, Britain offered to create a 'Sandhurst in the Sand', or an Afghan National Army Officer Academy, inside an existing barracks north-west of Kabul. This would involve committing between 120 and 150 British servicemen to the post-Transition training mission (in fact, the mission expanded to around 400 strong). While undoubtedly a welcome and sincere proposal – the British still felt they had something to offer in the way of turning out half-decent officers – it remained a very modest contribution. The British financial pledge was £70 million, or around one per cent of the funds needed to keep even a down-sized ANSF on its feet.

For all the recognition that standing up viable security forces was imperative to ISAF's mission, the process had become a necessarily rushed and unrealistic project. America was funding 90 per cent of Afghanistan's security needs. Other NATO countries had been funding 4 per cent, and Kabul 6 per cent. This was both unsustainable and undesirable. As funds diminished, the Afghan Ministries of Defence and Interior became rivals, grabbing

armfuls of dollars from the shrinking pot of gold. European countries both balked at paying the financial and human cost of training the ANSF: at no point in the history of the NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan (NTM-A) were all the pledged training posts filled. Despite constant American lobbying, NTM-A was routinely short of, on average, 1,000 European trainers.

A measure of the unrealism can be gauged by the story of the nascent Afghan Air Force. In 2010, this comprised of around ten, second-hand transport aircraft and forty ageing Russian helicopters, a majority donated and all reliant on Western funding and maintenance. A goal was set to triple this force, and to procure up to twenty close support attack aircraft. Basic arithmetic revealed that this goal was not just fanciful but dishonest. Just maintaining the existing fleet was going to swallow up available funds and still leave aircraft parked idle. There was never any realistic hope that the Afghan Air Force would expand beyond its limited size and certainly not without further massive injections of cash that were not forthcoming. The best example of this was the saga of twenty second-hand Italian G-222 transport aircraft procured at a cost of half a billion dollars. With insufficient funds to actually maintain the aircraft they remained parked and unused in a corner of Kabul Airport. Four aircraft never actually made it to Afghanistan before the funds dried up. They ended their days in a US air base in Germany. The aircraft in Kabul were eventually broken up for scrap.

The establishment and training of Afghan police forces told another story of the contradictions and frustrations faced by ISAF. Afghanistan had actually enjoyed a seventy year long tradition of a more or less functioning police force until the civil war.[1164] Reconstituting this tradition proved hard work. There were three major reforms in 2003-05, 2006, and 2008-10. The main doctrinal disputes were between the Europeans who were keen to establish a traditional police force, and the Americans who argued for a paramilitary police with counter-insurgency functions. On the Afghan side the tension was between centralised control in Kabul and handing over the policing to powerful local strong men. In many cases, Kabul had no choice. Patronage and corruption infected the system from the beginning. The outcome was multiple initiatives and multiple police forces: the Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP); the Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP); the Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF); the Afghan National Police (ANP); the Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP); the Afghan Border Police (ABP); and the Afghan Local Police (ALP). All competed for dwindling resources and influence. Ironically and entirely thanks to American largesse, the Ministry of Interior boasted one of

the largest police budgets in all South Asia. It was mostly wasted. No force escaped the corrosive effects of corruption. ISAF consoled itself with quoting gross numbers of trained police but rural Afghans largely trusted in their own resources, or on the Taliban to deliver justice.

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The summer of 2011 had sounded the starter gun for withdrawal. The following summer ushered in the last in-country team, that unlucky group of officials that history unfairly passes over because their unfortunate role is to shut the shop. In August, US Ambassador Ryan Crocker ceded to his deputy James Cunningham (it was Crocker who observed in frustration that the annual Department of State budget in Afghanistan was not even worth one week's worth of military operations). In turn, Britain's Simon Gass was succeeded by Dutch Ambassador Maurits Jochems as NATO's Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan. The fact that the British government was no longer interested in filling this position, which it had monopolised from the beginning, spoke volumes. In the United States, David Petraeus *imperator* fell to a sex scandal, a sad blow to a thirty-seven year-old service marriage, and an unhappy end to a distinguished career. His demise implicated the ISAF Commander, US Marine Corps General John Allen who was succeeded in a pre-planned move by the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Joseph Dunford. Perhaps the greatest loss was Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Exhausted by the weight of office, she ceded to Senator John Kerry, but not before laying some claim to being the joint, most able incumbent of this testing office in a generation. The other was Condoleeza Rice. It was notable that over this challenging period, America was served by these two formidably talented and dedicated women.

It was Secretary of State Clinton who had argued the United States was unwilling to disengage from Afghanistan, despite all the difficulties, because 'we have seen this movie before'.[1165] Hence the ten year 'Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA)' signed on 1 May 2012. However, this agreement was more rhetoric than concrete steps. The Agreement did not have the legal force of a treaty and both sides could withdraw giving a year's notice. With negotiations over the post-2014 status of forces stalled, there was a chance the SPA would fall off the diplomatic cliff. The SPA eventually transmuted into a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), which proved an even more unsatisfactory arrangement.

In a fit of pique, justified by disagreements over peace talks and continuing ISAF raids on Afghan homes, Karzai refused to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement. It was the only

way he could thumb his nose at Washington and he did so with grating impudence - a*près moi le deluge*. Yet, what was America getting for this very generous offer? Very little – Afghanistan promised to fight al-Qaeda, a frankly empty pledge which it could not fulfil, but American troops remaining in Afghanistan would not be allowed to undertake operations against the insurgency, and nor would an American government be allowed to use its bases for other operations in the region. It was not worth the paper it was written on, and too many hard-nosed American negotiators knew it. By this stage, Obama and Karzai were no longer on speaking terms, Secretary of State Kerry was distracted by the Syria crisis, and the US Embassy in Kabul, much like the in-country team at the end of the Vietnam War, had the unenviable task of unwinding America's commitment to Afghanistan. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, a Vietnam veteran, found himself playing the role of Mel Laird, re-balancing America's armed forces for a post-Afghan future. Regardless of Karzai's refusal to sign the BSA, it made little long term difference anyway. There was no surprise when President Obama announced that troop levels would be reduced to 9,000 at the end of 2014, and that the Afghan commitment would end completely by 2016.

Reconciliation proved the chimera it had always been. Karzai vainly attempted to woo the Taliban by describing them as 'disenchanted brothers', as if the last decade of fighting had been an unfortunate family tiff, but never acknowledged that it was precisely with him that the Taliban were disenchanted. American negotiators became far more pragmatic and hard-headed. Bruce Riedel, who headed the Afghanistan strategic review for the Obama administration summed it best:

'I think that the talks are a long shot at the very best for a number of reasons. First, so far it's not clear that the Taliban leadership—that's Mullah Mohammed Omar and his Quetta Shura—are interested in anything more than Afghan prisoner releases from Guantanamo and perhaps driving a wedge between the NATO alliance on the one hand and the Karzai government on the other. What the Taliban has said so far is that it's prepared to talk to America and NATO, but it still regards the Karzai government as illegitimate and a stooge of the West.'

Happily, for Mullah Omar, an American president felt the same way. The single priority became securing the release of America's only prisoner of war, a troubled young soldier named Bowe Bergdahl who left his patrol base and spent five years in Taliban captivity. Before wandering off, Bergdahl wrote a letter to his parents that revealed a deeply disturbed mind full of loathing. But the mad also have their insights, and this twenty-three year old was close to the truth in his characterization of a war of ignorance

and lies:

‘mom, dad,

The future is too good to waste on lies. And life is way too short to care for the damnation of others, as well as to spend it helping fools with their ideas that are all wrong…I am sorry for everything here. These people need help, yet what they get is the most conceited country in the world telling them that they are nothing and that they are stupid, that they have no idea how to live…we make fun of them in front of their faces… I am sorry for everything.’[1166]

Bergdahl was released on 31 May 2014. Five Guantanamo detainees were handed over to the Qatari authorities, including the former Taliban army chief of staff and a deputy intelligence minister. It seemed unfortunately apt that Bergdahl went into psychiatric care (and was later charged for dereliction of duty). The five Taliban old boys celebrated to the cries of ‘Allahu Ahkbar!’

The key was always Pakistan, illuminated brilliantly in Anatol Lieven’s *A Difficult Country*. The deterioration in relations between America and Pakistan, especially after the killing of Osama bin Laden, was alarming. For some Pakistanis, the last ten years had been a ritual humiliation at the hands of a superpower and these seemed intent on exacting revenge. Following the raid in Abbottabad, America suspended $800 million in military aid to Pakistan. This provoked retaliation, open and covert. Several Western targets were attacked including the Intercontinental Hotel, the American Embassy and ISAF HQ (provoking exaggerated mutterings of a Tet-style offensive). A multi-national base was attacked with a massive truck bomb that killed five soldiers and wounded another seventy-seven. And to foreclose any possibility of reconciliation, the venerable Burhanuddin Rabbani, leader of the High Peace Council, was assassinated. Mobile telephone intercepts suggested that the Haqqani Network was implicated, abetted by the ISI. The outgoing Chief of Joint Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, with nothing to lose in his last week in post, told a Senate hearing, quite bluntly: ‘The Haqqani Network acts as a veritable arm of Pakistan’s ISI’, which was true. This was a clear message that American patience with malevolent elements in the Pakistani establishment had run out.

On the border, tensions rose. At the end of November 2011, an incident involving a US special force detachment resulted in the deaths of twenty-four Pakistani soldiers. The Taliban had adopted the tactic of basing themselves alongside border posts, in collusion with the Pakistani soldiers. When insurgents opened fire on the American force, the

Pakistani soldiers unwisely joined in. A subsequent investigation revealed that responsibility for what followed lay entirely with the Pakistanis. A US liaison officer had sought assurances that no Pakistani soldiers were in the vicinity, and a map-reading error resulted in this assurance being given. Pakistani *amour propre* could not admit to this. The Torkham and Chaman border crossing points were closed to NATO traffic (they would not re-open until the following July), and Shamsi Air Base was closed to the USAF. The drone strikes went on, but less publically.

If America was liquidating its Afghanistan War, where did this leave NATO? Asking whether the Alliance had won or lost the war became irrelevant. Certainly, nobody in European capitals, or even Washington, was bothering to pose the question. Nonetheless, entirely ducking this thorny question hardly did justice to NATO's first real war, America's longest war, and, of course, an unresolved and continuing war for Afghans. ISAF officially stood up on 1 January 2002, and ended the mission on 28 December 2014. Thirteen years of fighting could not be lightly dismissed.

It was a fact that ISAF quit leaving the enemy undefeated. The three principal insurgent leaders, Mullah Omar, Jallaludin Haqqani, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, all survived as did their armies (Mullah Omar, of course, died in 2013, but his passing away was kept secret). This was not all down to Pakistan providing sanctuary and support, although this was an important factor in the war. It was more because in an echo of George Herring's judgement on the Vietnam War, ISAF became embroiled in an unwinnable war, which it did not even try to win – except for one brief period. This period was under McChrystal, and it was called the '81+41 Strategy'. An index of how soon the *will* to win evaporated can be gauged from the fact that virtually no ISAF senior officer, if questioned in the last four years of the war, would probably have even heard of, or could explain, the '81+41 Strategy'. It was dropped like a hot potato precisely because it was the only articulated strategy for winning militarily in the entire war, which nobody cared to do. McChrystal's '81+41 Strategy' was this: to 'win', ISAF had to secure 81 'Key Terrain Districts' and 41 'Area of Interest Districts'. The rest of the country could sort itself out. These districts were concentrated in Helmand and Kandahar in the south-west; in Paktika, Paktiya, Khost, Ghazni, Nangahar, Kunar and Laghman in eastern and central Afghanistan; in Kunduz and Baghlan in the north; and in Badghis and Ghormach in the west. Whether or not this strategy would have resulted in an ISAF 'win' remains an open question. It was, at any rate, never attempted. On Tuesday 18 June 2013, the last Afghan district passed to ANSF control. As if to mark the occasion, four US soldiers were killed in Bagram.

The cost to Afghan civilians remained high although it should be noted that more Iraqis were being killed in now ‘liberated’ and ‘democratic’ Iraq than in Afghanistan. And of course, many, many more Muslims were being killed as a consequence of the misnamed Arab Spring. The average farmer in the Upper Gereshk Valley had plenty to grumble over the war, but it could have been a lot worse.

ISAF entered 2014 with all the gloom of a wake. The Consolidated Appropriations Act pushed American support for Afghan reconstruction past the symbolic $100 billion mark. It would eventually surpass all the aid given to sixteen European countries under the Marshall Aid program – a thought that should sober the average American taxpayer. Some $10 billion had now been spent on counter-narcotics programs. In a classic understatement, SIGAR observed, ‘The results of all this spending and activity leave something to be desired’. In fact, with the withdrawal of ISAF forces, counter-narcotics efforts were rapidly unravelling: 98 tons of opium was seized in 2011, this fell to 71 tons by 2012, and precipitately to 41 tons by the end of 2013. The British-trained Task Force 333 was conducting a third less operations, and seizures of hashish, now competing with opium, collapsed by 79 per cent.[1167] In many cases, the corrupt AUP were only raiding drug caches in order to sell the drugs themselves, which in a way was understandable as embezzlement of Western funds left many police unpaid for three months.

Around 60 per cent of this reconstruction pot had been spent standing up the Afghan security forces, but what had America got for its money? Officially, the ANA now stood at 178,816 strong but, as ever, the numbers were deeply misleading. Somehow, this primitive force had generated a MOD and command structure 26,000 strong. This cadre of opportunists sat in Kabul siphoning funds destined for the front lines. Over the previous year, over 8,000 of them had simply vanished with the cash (and not a few had probably headed for Europe). Over 50 percent of the ANA (63,905) were categorized mysteriously as ‘unavailable’ (by this stage there was plentiful evidence that the AUP had also got into the game of ‘ghost workers’). The true number of ANA actually deployed and undertaking a meaningful combat role had shrivelled. In the case of 215 Corps which the British had spent three years diligently training and mentoring, the figures were arresting. Over 70 per cent were categorised as ‘unavailable’ in January 2014, although the claim was made that this was because they were on operations.

All roads pointed to the 2014 presidential election and many were predicting disaster. Around 7,200 polling booths were established throughout the country, but some 750 never opened due to security concerns. In Helmand there were 147 polling booths, however the

voting was largely confined to Lashkar Gah and Gereshk. Nearly seven million Afghans voted, of which 34 per cent were women. The Taliban campaign to thwart the election proved a flop: there were more than 900 attacks during election week, roughly the same number as in 2009, but these were ineffectual. The Independent Election Complaints Commission recorded over 2,000 voting irregularities but it was accepted that the election would be decided by bartering and deals, not the popular vote. The surprise winner in the first round was Abdullah Abdullah, beating Ashraf Ghani into second place. Helmand's favoured candidate – Zalmay Rassoul – only managed to gain 10 per cent of the vote.

The second round of voting proved much less satisfactory. In Helmand, some 60,000 votes were apparently cast (less than 10 per cent of the electorate). Nationwide, massive electoral fraud lifted the Pashtun Ashraf Ghani above Abdullah Abdullah. Having suffered the loss of the last election due to fraud, Abdullah was in no mood to accept the result. After six months of haggling, a John Kerry-brokered deal saw Ghani installed as President and Abdullah assuming the odd post of Chief Executive Officer. Within a week, the crucial BSA and a status of armed forces agreement was signed. There was a collective sigh of relief but, unfortunately, few of Afghanistan's long term problems were being addressed by these arrangements. The British Prime Minister was the first international leader to visit the newly installed President Ghani. But it was telling that the first foreign trip made by Afghanistan's new president was to China.

Despite this unseemly scramble for the top post, the office of the president ended much as it began in 2001, as mayor of Kabul. Karzai ended his thirteen year marathon as President of the Afghan Interim Authority, and then as full President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, with a characteristically abrupt comment: 'I can't wait to leave'. This was somewhat disingenuous as before quitting he had ordered the construction of a personal residence within the presidential compound, ensuring that he would remain within earshot of the next appointee. Karzai had been the American candidate shoe-horned into the presidency – 'shit, the only boy we've got'. He left office bickering and criticising the benefactors who had placed him there. In a typical snub he quit thanking China, Germany, India, Iran, Japan, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Turkey, but pointedly not thanking the country that had propped up Afghanistan for the last decade, the United States. Nor did he mention Britain with whom relations had deteriorated beyond repair. On Helmand, Karzai was also characteristically blunt, and not without justification. The sacking of Governor Sher Akhundzada, the origin of all the British ills in Helmand, had been a terrible mistake. Why sacking the one man who could control Helmand's tribes was judged a good idea can only be answered by the FCO officials responsible for the idiotic

decision. Their names have never been revealed. It would have been better, Karzai offered, if the British had never entered Helmand.

For all his flaws, Karzai proved the great survivor. He was also not without his insights. An idealistic Western intervention did degenerate into a wasteful, corrupting, national chest-thumping competition in which domestic political concerns always trumped the needs of Afghans. American policy was driven from the barrel of a gun, consistently making matters worse. Too many Western experts had descended on Afghanistan, enriching themselves, adding useful bullet points to their CVs, and then vanishing as programs collapsed. His government had been bypassed and his position undermined. Afghanistan had been transformed into a laboratory for 'Coinistas', making their name touting all manner of futile theories on how to defeat insurgencies. So much promise had turned to dust.

This was the conclusion to ISAF's 'conditions-based' withdrawal – an Afghanistan that looked not dissimilar to the country the Soviet Army quit. And much like the final withdrawal of US combat troops from Vietnam in March 1973, Afghanistan was left with a 'leopard spot' map. In some areas government troops held sway, in others the Taliban now ruled. In Helmand, the game was restarted, as if the British had been nothing more than a passing thunder storm. Sher Akhundzada and his brother Amir, now governor of Uruzgan, gathered their old allies. These included Abdul Rahman Jan who had managed to consolidate his power bases in Nad-e Ali and Marjah. Opposing them were the old familiar faces: Rais Baghrani, now a senator; Mohammed Wali, ensconced in the parliament; the tribal leader Abdul Rahman Khan; and Malim Mir Wali Khan, also squatting in the Kabul legislature. A fragile Afghan army withdrew to the sanctuaries of district centres, and a crooked police force fell back on its old predatory ways. Within six months, the Taliban had recaptured Now Zad and Musa Qaleh. There were new roads, certainly, and civic buildings, some in use and some already falling into disrepair. Bost Airport functioned and Helmand had acquired two modern, military-grade runways and a control tower at Bastion. But the majority of the reconstruction projects only lasted as long as the last aid dollar and these had dried up. The great white elephant of the third turbine at Kajaki Dam was the capstone example, but there were hundreds more. And unlike the period of the Soviet withdrawal, Helmand was now left with an irrupted Taliban, victors of the endurance competition, as well as a thoroughly rotten economy based on the opium poppy.

This pattern was repeated across Afghanistan. All the old warlords resurfaced, in many

ways stronger: Ismael Khan in Herat; the indefatigable Abdul Rashid Dostum in Mazar-e Sharif; Fahim Khan in the deep north; and Usted Mohammed Mohaqqeq in central Afghanistan (Khan would die prematurely, provoking a bout of national mourning). The grand exercise in nation-building, the euphemistic 'capacity building', succeeded in producing an astonishing capacity for rampant, institutional corruption, but little more. Democracy was a sham, and the artificially created state was entirely dependent on foreign aid for its survival. Pauline Baker, President of Fund for Peace, sketched the picture as well as anyone:

'Over the past dozen years, ISAF has created a virtual state within a state that will shrink dramatically once combat forces depart. This will leave a much weakened, highly militarized and deeply corrupt narco-state that could descend into outright civil war and, possibly, partition. The central question is not whether the Western-trained, supplied and financed Afghan security forces will be able to contain the Taliban insurgency, as is commonly thought. Even if they can, the more critical question is whether the state itself will hold together once Western life support is removed.'[1168]

The government's annual domestic revenue amounted to about $2 billion per annum or comparable to Bournemouth's operating budget. The dependency on Western on-budget assistance was so acute that in late 2010, the US government contracted Ernst &Young and KPMG to assess the ability of the sixteen Afghan ministries to manage this money. Predictably, both concluded that none of the ministries they assessed 'could manage and account for funds properly…' DfID, and every other agency, had spent ten years pouring taxpayer's money down a sink hole.

Aid millionaires were created, many now living in the Gulf States, and modernity did arrive in the capital and larger provincial cities, but for the majority of rural or displaced Afghans, which is to say the majority of Afghans, life did not greatly change. Much like Saigon, Kabul became a magnet for these peoples. The Taliban capital had had a population of roughly 1.5 million. By the time ISAF departed, this had swelled to 6 million, the majority living in shanty towns without water, electricity or heat. The best indicator of ISAF's withdrawal proved to be plummeting property prices as wealthy Afghans fled the country. As much as $4.6 billion *in cash* was being expatriated by these aid nouveaux riches every year – or more than Afghanistan's entire Gross Domestic Product.[1169] This was just the licit declared amounts. The true figure of embezzled aid funds was much higher. The majority of Afghans were still living on about three dollars a day. Ethnic divides were as sharp as before, Pashtun pride and resentment were as prickly.

Pakistani meddling was unchecked. This was a country experiencing many thousands of insurgent attacks every year (accurate data collection unfortunately collapsed with ISAF's withdrawal, so even vaguely reliable numbers are unavailable).[1170] Over 3,500 civilians were being killed, but in one sense this number was trivial. This was also a country where roughly half of all children were not reaching the age of five. The lot of an Afghan woman remained irredeemably constricted by custom and religion.

Nobody won the war because the war which began with the Soviet invasion in the 1980s, which descended into civil war in the 1990s, and which became a Western war in the 2000s, remained unfinished business. One cycle of violence had ended, which only implied another would begin. This was Afghanistan at the end of 2014 – a country ripe for a fall.

An argument may be made that the war in Helmand marked a swan song for the British Army, if not a requiem for Britain's armed forces. Two successive governments, representing the three main political parties, decisively cut the size of the armed forces in the middle of two wars. This historically unprecedented slicing of Britain's defences meant that the British Army was at its smallest size since the 18th century, the moment when the history of the modern British Army began. A 300 year cycle appeared to reach its closing chapter. The arithmetic was inescapable. In the first Gulf War, the four surviving divisions in the British Army had been denuded to field one armoured division. In the second Gulf War, the two surviving divisions had been stripped to field one armoured brigade, augmented by light forces. With the defence cuts enacted by the 2010 defence review and subsequently, the British Army was effectively emasculated. It was ironic that one of the central lessons of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars was that Britain, in the end, pays a higher cost for under-funding and under-resourcing her armed forces. Yet, once again, a British government found itself in this familiarly uncomfortable position. The country could now deploy a brigade of soldiers, about ten warships, and a squadron of strike aircraft. These are trivial forces. A telling moment in popular culture came in an edition of the humorous television series *Have I Got News for You*, hosted by Jeremy Clarkson. In response to a brewing crisis in Ukraine in the spring of 2014, four Typhoon jets were deployed to Eastern Europe. 'Four!' Clarkson exclaimed. 'That's the entire air force. Are they crazy?' At least the British could see the funny side of their own decline.

If this pessimistic outlook for the remainder of the century has some redeeming hope it is courage. Armies cannot live on crumbs, but they cannot survive without courage either. Perhaps the outstanding feature of the war in Helmand was the courage displayed by the

soldiers, marines, airmen and sailors who fought in that province. The roll call of gallantry medal winners represented public recognition. Behind this public recognition were hundreds of unrecorded acts and moments of private fears overcome by ordinary young men and women. Every patrol that stepped out of its base had to steel itself for the possibility of death or terrible injury. Over the course of the war, tens of thousands of such patrols were mounted. If the war was a swansong for the British Army then the band played lustily. Tommy Atkins marched off the world stage unbowed and with a flourish of courage.

ANNEX A
ROLL OF HONOUR

Note: The Ministry of Defence did not routinely release details of fatalities suffered by 22 SAS, the SBS and 1 SRR. The full roll of honour of the British dead from the Afghanistan War would, of course, include the names of these soldiers and marines. More military working dogs may have also died serving in special force units. The British Army's only prisoner of war was such a dog, a Belgian Malinois, lost after an aborted special force raid in eastern Afghanistan. The Taliban nicknamed it 'the Colonel' and refused to return their prize. The regiments and units are as they were reported by the MOD. They include apparent anomalies such as the Blues and Royals, who are part of the Household Cavalry Mounted Regiment.

Afghanistan 2002 - 2015

2002

Private Darren John George – 1 Royal Anglian

Sergeant Robert Busuttil – Royal Logistic Corps

Corporal John Gregory – Royal Logistic Corps

2004

Lance Corporal Steven Sherwood – Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire Light Infantry

Private Jonathan Kitulagoda - Rifle Volunteers, (Territorial Army)

2006

Lance Bombardier James Dwyer – 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery

Marine Richard J Watson – 42 Commando

Marine Jonathan Wigley – 45 Commando

Marine Gary Wright – 45 Commando

Lance Corporal Paul Muirhead – 1 Royal Irish

Lance Corporal Luke McCulloch - 1 Royal Irish

Corporal Mark Wright - 3 Para

Private Craig O'Donnell – Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (5 Scots)

Flight Lieutenant Steven Johnson - RAF

Flight Lieutenant Leigh Mitchelmore - RAF

Flight Lieutenant Gareth Nicholas- RAF

Flight Lieutenant Allan Squires- RAF

Flight Lieutenant Steven Swarbrick - RAF

Flight Sergeant Gary Andrews- RAF

Flight Sergeant Stephen Beattie- RAF

Flight Sergeant Gerard Bell- RAF

Flight Sergeant Adrian Davies - RAF

Sergeant Benjamin Knight- RAF

Sergeant John Langton- RAF

Sergeant Gary Quilliam- RAF

Corporal Oliver Simon Dicketts - Parachute Regiment

Marine Joseph Windall - Royal Marines

Ranger Anare Draiva - 1 Royal Irish

Lance Corporal Jonathan Hetherington – 14 Signal Regiment

Corporal Bryan Budd – 3 Para

Lance Corporal Sean Tansey - The Life Guards

Private Leigh Reeves – Royal Logistic Corps

Private Andrew Cutts – Royal Logistic Corps

Captain Alex Eida – Royal Horse Artillery

Second Lieutenant Ralph Johnson – Household Cavalry Regiment

Lance Corporal Ross Nicholls – Blues and Royals

Private Damien Jackson – 3 Para

Corporal Peter Thorpe – Royal Signals

Lance Corporal Jabron Hashmi – Intelligence Corps

Captain David Patton – Parachute Regiment (serving with special forces)

Sergeant Paul Bartlett – Royal Marines (serving with special forces)

Captain Jim Philippson - 7 Parachute Regiment Royal Horse Artillery

Lance Corporal Peter Craddock – Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire Regiment

Corporal Mark Cridge - 7 Signal Regiment

2007

Sergeant Lee Johnson – 2 Yorks (Green Howards)

Trooper Jack Sadler - The Honourable Artillery Company (Territorial Army)

Captain John McDermid - Royal Highland Fusiliers (2 Scots)

Lance Corporal Jake Alderton - 36 Engineer Regiment

Major Alexis Roberts – 1 Royal Gurkha Rifles

Colour Sergeant Phillip Newman – 4 Mercians (Territorial Army)

Private Brian Tunnicliffe – 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters)

Corporal Ivano Violino - 36 Engineer Regiment

Sergeant Craig Brelsford – 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters)

Private Johan Botha – 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters)

Private Damian Wright – 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters)

Private Ben Ford – 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters)

Senior Aircraftman Christopher Bridge - RAF Regiment

Private Aaron McClure – 1 Royal Anglian

Private Robert Foster– 1 Royal Anglian

Private John Thrumble– 1 Royal Anglian

Captain David Hicks – 1 Royal Anglian

Private Tony Rawson – 1 Royal Anglian

Lance Corporal Michael Jones - Royal Marines

Sergeant Barry Keen - 14 Signal Regiment

Guardsman David Atherton – Grenadier Guards

Lance Corporal Alex Hawkins – 1 Royal Anglian

Guardsman Daryl Hickey – Grenadier Guards

Sergeant Dave Wilkinson -19 Regiment Royal Artillery

Captain Sean Dolan – 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters)

Drummer Thomas Wright – 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters)

Guardsman Neil Downes – Grenadier Guards

Lance Corporal Paul Sandford – 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters)

Corporal Mike Gilyeat - Royal Military Police

Corporal Darren Bonner – 1 Royal Anglian

Guardsman Daniel Probyn – Grenadier Guards

Lance Corporal George Davey – 1 Royal Anglian

Guardsman Simon Davison – Grenadier Guards

Private Chris Gray – 1 Royal Anglian

Warrant Officer Class 2 Michael Smith - 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery

Marine Benjamin Reddy - 42 Commando

Lance Bombardier Ross Clark - 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery

Lance Bombardier Liam McLaughlin - 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery

Marine Scott Summers - 42 Commando

Marine Jonathan Holland - 45 Commando

Lance Corporal Mathew Ford - 45 Commando

Marine Thomas Curry - 42 Commando

2008

Corporal Liam Elms - 45 Commando

Lance Corporal Benjamin Whatley - 42 Commando

Corporal Robert Deering - Commando Logistic Regiment

Rifleman Stuart Nash – 1 Rifles

Lieutenant Aaron Lewis - 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery

Lance Corporal Steven Fellows - 45 Commando

Marine Damian Davies – 45 Commando

Sergeant John Manuel – 45 Commando

Corporal Marc Birch – 45 Commando

Marine Tony Evans – 42 Commando

Marine Georgie Sparks - 42 Commando

Marine Alexander Lucas - 45 Commando

Colour Sergeant Krishnabahadur Dura – 2 Royal Gurkha Rifles

Marine Neil David Dunstan – Brigade Reconnaissance Force

Marine Robert Joseph McKibben – Brigade Reconnaissance Force

Rifleman Yubraj Rai – 2 Royal Gurkha Rifles

Trooper James Munday – Household Cavalry Regiment

Lance Corporal Nicky Mason – 2 Para

Private Jason Lee Rawstron – 2 Para

Warrant Officer Class 2 Gary O'Donnell GM - 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment (Royal Logistic Corps)

Ranger Justin Cupples – 1 Royal Irish

Corporal Barry Dempsey - Royal Highland Fusiliers (2 Scots)

Signaller Wayne Bland - 16 Signal Regiment

Private Peter Cowton – 2 Para

Sergeant Jonathan Mathews - The Highlanders (4 Scots)

Lance Corporal Kenneth Rowe - Royal Army Veterinary Corps

‘Sasha’ – 1 Military Working Dog Regiment

Corporal Jason Stuart Barnes – Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Lance Corporal James Johnson – Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (5 Scots)

Warrant Officer 2nd Class Dan Shirley - 13 Air Assault Support Regiment (Royal Logistics Corps)

Warrant Officer 2nd Class Michael Williams – 2 Para

Private Joe Whittaker – 4 Para (Territorial Army)

Corporal Sarah Bryant – Intelligence Corps

Corporal Sean Reeve – Royal Signals (Territorial Army SAS)

Lance Corporal Richard Larkin – Territorial Army SAS

Paul Stout – Territorial Army SAS

Lance Corporal James Bateman – 2 Para

Private Jeff Doherty – 2 Para

Private Nathan Cuthbertson – 2 Para

Private Daniel Gamble – 2 Para

Private Charles Murray – 2 Para

Marine Dale Gostick - Armoured Support Company, Royal Marines

James Thompson – No regiment given

Trooper Ratu Sakeasi Babakobau – Household Cavalry Regiment

Trooper Robert Pearson – Queen’s Royal Lancers

Senior Aircraftman Graham Livingstone - RAF Regiment

Senior Aircrafttman Gary Thompson - Royal Auxiliary Air Force Regiment

Lieutenant John Thornton – 40 Commando

Marine David Marsh - 40 Commando

Corporal Damian Mulvihill - 40 Commando

Corporal Damian Lawrence – 2 Yorkshire Regiment (Green Howards)

Corporal Gardiner – Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

2009

Sapper David Watson - 33 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal)

Rifleman Aidan Howell – 3 Rifles

Lance Corporal Tommy Brown - Parachute Regiment

Lance Corporal Christopher Roney – 3 Rifles

Lance Corporal Michael Pritchard - 4 Regiment Royal Military Police

Corporal Simon Hornby – 2 Duke of Lancaster's Regiment

Lance Corporal David Kirkness - 3 Rifles

Rifleman James Brown – 3 Rifles

Lance Corporal Adam Drane - 1 Royal Anglian

Acting Sergeant John Amer - Coldstream Guards

Sergeant Robert Loughran-Dickson – 4 Regiment Royal Military Police

Corporal Loren Marlton-Thomas - 33 Engineer Regiment (EOD)

Rifleman Andrew Fentiman – 7 Rifles (Territorial Army)

Rifleman Samuel Bassett - 4 Rifles (Territorial Army)

Rifleman Philip Allen – 2 Rifles

Serjeant Phillip Scott – 3 Rifles

Warrant Officer Class 1 Darren Chant – Grenadier Guards

Sergeant Matthew Telford – Grenadier Guards

Guardsman James Major - Grenadier Guards

Acting Corporal Steven Boote – Royal Military Police

Corporal Nicholas Webster-Smith - Royal Military Police

Staff Sergeant Olaf Schmid - Royal Logistic Corps

Corporal Thomas Mason - Black Watch (3 Scots)

Corporal James Oakland - Royal Military Police

Lance Corporal James Hill - Coldstream Guards

Guardsman Jamie Janes - Grenadier Guards

Acting Corporal Marcin Wojtak - 34 Squadron RAF Regiment

Private James Prosser – 2 Royal Welsh

Acting Sergeant Michael Lockett MC - 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters)

Acting Serjeant Stuart McGrath – 2 Rifles

Trooper Brett Hall - 2 Royal Tank Regiment

Kingsman Jason Dunn-Bridgeman - 2 Duke of Lancaster's Regiment

Corporal John Harrison - Parachute Regiment

Private Gavin Elliott – 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters)

Lance Corporal Richard Brandon - Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Sergeant Stuart Millar – Black Watch (3 Scots)

Private Kevin Elliott - Black Watch (3 Scots)

Sergeant Lee Houltram - Royal Marines

Fusilier Shaun Bush - 2 Royal Regiment of Fusiliers

Serjeant Paul McAleese 2 Rifles

Private Johnathon Young – 3 Yorks (Duke of Wellington's)

Lance Corporal James Fullarton – 2 Royal Regiment of Fusiliers

Fusilier Simon Annis – 2 Royal Regiment of Fusiliers

Fusilier Louis Carter – 2 Royal Regiment of Fusiliers

Sergeant Simon Valentine – 2 Royal Regiment of Fusiliers

Private Richard Hunt – 2 Royal Welsh

Captain Mark Hale – 2 Rifles

Rifleman Daniel Wild – 2 Rifles

Lance Bombardier Matthew Hatton - 40 Regiment Royal Artillery

Private Jason George Williams – 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters)

Corporal Kevin Mulligan, - Parachute Regiment

Lance Corporal Dale Hopkins – Parachute Regiment

Private Kyle Adams - Parachute Regiment

Craftsman Anthony Lombardi - Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Trooper Phillip Lawrence - Light Dragoons

Warrant Officer Class 2 Sean Upton – 5 Regiment Royal Artillery

Bombardier Craig Hopson – 40 Regiment Royal Artillery

Guardsman Christopher King - Coldstream Guards

Captain Daniel Shepherd - 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment (Royal Logistic Corps)

Corporal Joseph Etchells - 2 Royal Regiment of Fusiliers

Rifleman Aminiasi Toge – 2 Rifles

Corporal Jonathan Horne – 2 Rifles

Rifleman William Aldridge – 2 Rifles

Rifleman James Backhouse – 2 Rifles

Rifleman Joseph Murphy – 2 Rifles

Rifleman Daniel Simpson – 2 Rifles

Corporal Lee Scott - 2 Royal Tank Regiment

Private John Brackpool - Welsh Guards

Rifleman Daniel Hume – 4 Rifles (Territorial Army)

Trooper Christopher Whiteside - Light Dragoons

Captain Ben Babington-Browne - 22 Engineer Regiment

Lance Corporal Dane Elson - Welsh Guards

Lance Corporal David Denn - Light Dragoons

Private Robert Laws – 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters)

Lieutenant Colonel Rupert Thorneloe – Welsh Guards

Trooper Joshua Hammond - 2 Royal Tank Regiment

Major Sean Birchall - Welsh Guards

Lieutenant Paul Mervis – 2 Rifles

Private Robert McLaren - Black Watch (3 Scots)

Rifleman Cyrus Thatcher – 2 Rifles

Lance Corporal Nigel Moffett - Light Dragoons

Corporal Stephen Bolger - Parachute Regiment

Lance Corporal Kieron Hill – 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters)

Lance Corporal Robert Richards - Royal Marines

Sapper Jordan Rossi - 38 Engineer Regiment

Fusilier Petero Suesue - 2 Royal Regiment of Fusiliers

Marine Jason Mackie - Royal Marines

Lieutenant Mark Evison - Welsh Guards

Sergeant Ben Ross - 3 Regiment, Royal Military Police

Corporal Kumar Pun – 1 Royal Gurkha Rifles

Rifleman Adrian Sheldon – 2 Rifles

Sergeant Sean Binnie - Black Watch (3 Scots)

Lance Sergeant Tobie Fasfous - Welsh Guards

Corporal Dean John – Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Corporal Graeme Stiff - Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Lance Corporal Christopher Harkett – 2 Royal Welsh

Marine Michael Laski - 45 Commando

Corporal Tom Gaden – 1 Rifles

Lance Corporal Paul Upton – 1 Rifles

Rifleman Jamie Gunn – 1 Rifles

Lance Corporal Stephen Kingscott – 1 Rifles

Marine Darren Smith - 45 Commando

Corporal Daniel Nield – 1 Rifles

Acting Corporal Richard Robinson – 1 Rifles

Captain Tom Sawyer - 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery

Corporal Danny Winter - 45 Commando

Marine Travis Mackin - 45 Commando

Serjeant Chris Reed - 6 Rifles (Territorial Army)

2010

Warrant Office Second Class Charles Wood – 23 Pioneer Regiment (Royal Logistic Corps)

Corporal Steven Dunn – 216 (Parachute) Signal Squadron

Private John Howard – 3 Para

Guardsman Christopher Davies - Irish Guards

Ranger Aaron McCormick -1 Royal Irish

Senior Aircraftman Scott Hughes - 1 Squadron RAF Regiment

Sapper William Blanchard -101 (City of London) Engineer Regiment

Corporal David Barnsdale - 33 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal)

‘Treo’- 1 Military Working Dog Regiment

Sergeant Peter Rayner - 2 Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment

Rifleman Suraj Gurung - 1 Royal Gurkha Rifles

Corporal Matthew Thomas - Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Sergeant Andrew Jones - Royal Engineers

Trooper Andrew Howarth - Queen’s Royal Lancers

Kingsman Darren Deady – 2 Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment

Captain Andrew Griffiths - 2 Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment

Lance Corporal Joseph Pool - Royal Scots Borderers (1 Scots)

Lance Corporal Jordan Bancroft – 1 Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment

Sapper Ishwor Gurung - 69 Gurkha Field Squadron, 21 Engineer Regiment

Sapper Darren Foster - 21 Engineer Regiment

Rifleman Remand Kulung - 1 Mercians (Cheshires)

Lieutenant John Sanderson – 1 Mercians (Cheshires)

Marine Adam Brown - 40 Commando

Lance Sergeant Dale McCallum - Scots Guards

Sapper Mark Smith, - 36 Engineer Regiment

Corporal Matthew Stenton - Royal Dragoon Guards

Lance Corporal Stephen Monkhouse - Scots Guards

Staff Sergeant Brett Linley - 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment (Royal Logistic Corps)

Sergeant David Monkhouse - Royal Dragoon Guards

Senior Aircraftman Gunner Kinikki Griffiths - RAF

Marine Jonathan David Crookes - 40 Commando

Marine Matthew Harrison - 40 Commando

Major James Bowman – 1 Royal Gurkha Rifles

Lieutenant Neal Turkington – 1 Royal Gurkha Rifles

Corporal Arjun Purja Pun – 1 Royal Gurkha Rifles

Marine David Hart - 40 Commando

Bombardier Samuel Robinson – 5 Regiment Royal Artillery

Private Thomas Sephton – 1 Mercians (Cheshires)

Trooper James Leverett - Royal Dragoon Guards

Royal Marine Corporal Seth Stephens – Special Boat Service

Corporal Jamie Kirkpatrick - 101 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal)

Bombardier Stephen Gilbert - 4 Regiment Royal Artillery

Colour Sergeant Martyn Horton – 1 Mercians (Cheshires)

Lance Corporal David Ramsden – 1 Yorks (Prince of Wales' Own)

Private Douglas Halliday – 1 Mercians (Cheshires)

Private Alex Isaac – 1 Mercians (Cheshires)

Sergeant Steven Darbyshire - 40 Commando

Lance Corporal Michael Taylor - 40 Commando

Marine Paul Warren - 40 Commando

Marine Richard Hollington - 40 Commando

Trooper Ashley Smith - Royal Dragoon Guards

Corporal Taniela Tolevu Rogoiruwai – 1 Duke of Lancaster's Regiment

Kingsman Ponipate Tagitaginimoce – 1 Duke of Lancaster's Regiment

Marine Steven Birdsall - 40 Commando

Lance Corporal Andrew Breeze – 1 Mercians (Cheshires)

Private Jonathan Monk - 2 Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment

Lance Bombardier Mark Chandler – 3 Regiment Royal Horse Artillery

Corporal Terry Webster – 1 Mercians (Cheshires)

Lance Corporal Alan Cochran – 1 Mercians (Cheshires)

Marine Anthony Hotine - 40 Commando

Marine Scott Taylor - 40 Commando

Corporal Stephen Curley - 40 Commando

Gunner Zak Cusack – 4 Regiment Royal Artillery

Corporal Stephen Walker – 40 Commando

Corporal Christopher Harrison - 40 Commando

Sapper Daryn Roy - 21 Engineer Regiment

Lance Corporal Barry Buxton – 21 Engineer Regiment

Corporal Harvey Holmes - 1Mercians (Cheshires)

Fusilier Jonathan Burgess - 1 Royal Welsh

Rifleman Mark Turner – 3 Rifles

Guardsman Michael Sweeney - Coldstream Guards

Rifleman Daniel Holkham – 3 Rifles

Lance Corporal of Horse Jonathan Woodgate - Household Cavalry

Serjeant Steven Campbell – 3 Rifles

Lance Corporal Scott Hardy – 1 Royal Anglian

Private James Grigg - 1 Royal Anglian

Captain Martin Driver – 1 Royal Anglian

Corporal Stephen Thompson – 1 Rifles

Lance Corporal Tom Keogh – 4 Rifles

Rifleman Liam Maughan – 3 Rifles

Rifleman Jonathon Allott – 3 Rifles

Corporal Richard Green – 3 Rifles

Rifleman Carlo Apolis – 4 Rifles

Sergeant Paul Fox - 28 Engineer Regiment

Rifleman Martin Kinggett – 4 Rifles

Senior Aircraftman Luke Southgate - II Squadron RAF Regiment

Lance Sergeant David Walker - Scots Guards

Lieutenant Douglas Dalzell - Coldstream Guards

Sapper Guy Mellors - 36 Engineer Regiment

Kingsman Sean Dawson – 2 Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment

Rifleman Mark Marshall – 6 Rifles

Lance Sergeant Dave Greenhalgh - Grenadier Guards

Lance Corporal Darren Hicks - Coldstream Guards

Warrant Officer Class 2 David Markland - 36 Engineer Regiment

Corporal John Moore - Royal Scots Borderers (1 Scots)

Private Sean McDonald - Royal Scots Borderers (1 Scots)

Corporal Liam Riley – 3 Yorks (Duke of Wellington's)

Lance Corporal Graham Shaw – 3 Yorks (Duke of Wellington's)

Lance Corporal Daniel Cooper – 3 Rifles

Rifleman Peter Aldridge – 4 Rifles

Corporal Lee Brownson – 3 Rifles

Rifleman Luke Farmer – 3 Rifles

Captain Daniel Read - 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment (Royal Logistic Corps)

Private Robert Hayes – 1 Royal Anglian

2011

Private Joseva Vatubua – Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (5 Scots)

Private Martin Bell – 2 Para

Ranger David Dalzell – Royal Irish

Warrant Officer Class 2 Colin Beckett – 3 Para

Private Lewis Hendry – 3 Para

Private Conrad Lewis – 4 Para (Territorial Army)

Lance Corporal Kyle Marshall – 2 Para

Private Robert Wood – Royal Logistic Corps

Private Dean Hutchinson – Royal Logistic Corps

Lance Corporal Liam Tasker Royal Army Veterinary Corps

'Theo' – 1 Military Working Dog Regiment

Lance Corporal Stephen McKee – 1 Royal Irish

Private Daniel Prior – 2 Para

Major Matthew Collins – Irish Guards

Lance Sergeant Mark Burgan – Irish Guards

Colour Sergeant Alan Cameron – Scots Guards

Captain Lisa Head - 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment (Royal Logistic Corps)

Marine Nigel Mead – 42 Commando

Colour Serjeant Kevin Fortuna – 1 Rifles

Marine Samuel Alexander – 42 Commando

Lieutenant Oliver Augustin – 42 Commando

Corporal Michael Pike - Highlanders (4 Scots)

Lance Corporal Martin Gill - 42 Commando

Rifleman Martin Lamb – 1 Rifles

Corporal Lloyd Newell – 22 Special Air Service

Craftsman Andrew Found – Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Private Gareth Bellingham – 3 Mercians (Staffords)

Lance Corporal Paul Watkins – 9/12 Lancers

Corporal Mark Palin – 1 Rifles

Marine James Wright – 42 Commando

Lieutenant Daniel Clack – 1 Rifles

Sergeant Barry Weston – 42 Commando

Lance Corporal Jonathan McKinlay – 1 Rifles

Marine David Fairbrother – 42 Commando

Rifleman Vijay Rai – 2 Royal Gurkha Rifles

Private Matthew Haseldin – 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters)

Private Matthew Thornton – 4 Yorks (Territorial Army)

Lance Corporal Peter Eustace – 2 Rifles

Lieutenant David Boyce – Queen’s Dragoon Guards

Lance Corporal Richard Scanlon – Queen’s Dragoon Guards

Private Thomas Lake – 1 Princess of Wales’s Royal Regiment

Rifleman Sheldon Steel – 5 Rifles

Sapper Elijah Bond – Royal Engineers

Captain Tom Jennings – Royal Marines

Squadron leader Anthony Downing – RAF

Private John King – 1 Yorks (Prince of Wales's Own)

2012

Rifleman Sachin Limbu – 1 Royal Gurkha Rifles

Signaller Ian Sartorious-Jones – Royal Signals

Lance Corporal Gajbahadur Gurung – 2 Royal Gurkha Rifles (serving with 1 Yorks)

Senior Aircraftman Ryan Tomlin – 2 Squadron RAF Regiment

Sergeant Nigel Coupe – 1 Duke of Lancaster's Regiment

Corporal Jake Hartley – 3 Yorks (Duke of Wellington's)

Private Anthony Frampton – 3 Yorks (Duke of Wellington's)

Private Christopher Kershaw –3 Yorks (Duke of Wellington's)

Private Daniel Wade –3 Yorks (Duke of Wellington's)

Private Daniel Wilford - 3 Yorks (Duke of Wellington's)

Captain Rupert Bowers – 2 Mercians (Worcesters and Foresters)

Sergeant Luke Taylor – Royal Marines

Lance Corporal Michael Foley – Adjutant General's Corps

Corporal Jack Stanley – Queen's Royal Hussars

Sapper Connor Ray – 33 Engineer Regiment (EOD)

Guardsman Michael Roland – Grenadier Guards

Corporal Andrew Roberts – 23 Pioneer Regiment

Private Ratu Silibaravi – 23 Pioneer Regiment

Corporal Brent McCarthy – RAF

Lance Corporal Lee Davies – Welsh Guards

Captain Stephen Healey – 1 Royal Welsh

Corporal Michael Thacker – 1 Royal Welsh

Private Gregg Stone – 3 Yorks (Duke of Wellington's)

Lance Corporal James Ashworth – Grenadier Guards

Corporal Alex Guy – 1 Royal Anglian

Warrant Officer Second Class Leonard Thomas – Royal Signals

Guardsman Craig Roderick – Welsh Guards

Guardsman Apete Tuisovurua – Welsh Guards

Lieutenant Andrew Chesterman – 3 Rifles

Lance Corporal Matthew Smith – Royal Engineers

Guardsman Jamie Shadrake – Grenadier Guards

Guardsman Karl Whittle – Grenadier Guards

Sergeant Lee Davidson – Light Dragoons

Lance Corporal Duane Groom – Grenadier Guards

Sergeant Gareth Thursby - 3 Yorks (Duke of Wellington's)

Private Thomas Wroe - 3 Yorks (Duke of Wellington's)

Sergeant Jonathan Kups – Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Captain James Townley – Royal Engineers

Captain Carl Manley – Royal Marines

Corporal David O'Connor – 40 Commando

Corporal Channing Day – 3 Medical Regiment

Lieutenant Edward Drummond-Baxter – 1 Royal Gurkha Rifles

Lance Corporal Siddhanta Kunwar – 1 Royal Gurkha Rifles

Captain Walter Barrie – 1 Scots (Royal Regiment of Scotland)

2013

Sapper Reginald Walker – 21 Engineer Regiment

Kingsman David Shaw – 1 Duke of Lancaster's Regiment

Lance Corporal Jamie Webb – 1 Mercian Regiment (Cheshires)

Corporal William Savage – Royal Highland Fusiliers (2 Scots)

Fusilier Samuel Flint - Royal Highland Fusiliers (2 Scots)

Private Robert Hetherington – 51st Highlanders (7 Scots, Territorial Army)

Lance Corporal James Brynin – Intelligence Corps

Warrant Officer Second Class Ian Fisher – 3 Mercians (Staffords)

Captain Richard Holloway – Royal Engineers (serving with Special Boat Service)

2014

Sapper Adam Moralee -Task Force Helmand Engineer Regiment Group

Captain Thomas Spencer – 657 Squadron Army Air Corps

Warrant Officer Second Class Spencer Faulkner – 657 Squadron Army Air Corps

Flight Lieutenant Rakesh Chauhan – Royal Air Force

Corporal James Walter - 657 Squadron Army Air Corps

Lance Corporal Oliver Thomas – 3 Military Intelligence Battalion (Reserves)

2015

Lance Corporal Michael Campbell – 3 Royal Welsh

(Note: Lance Corporal Campbell was a Reservist who died, following an operation, three years after receiving gunshot wounds on Operation Herrick 16.)

ANNEX B
BRITISH ARMY STRENGTH
IN AFGHANISTAN 2001- 2014

According to the House of Commons Library, troop numbers were:

June 2002: 400

August 2003: 300

September 2004: 530

January 2005: 497

October 2005 544

May-July 2006: 5,700

End of July 2006: 4,900

October 2006: 5,845

July 2007: 6,200

November 2007: 7,470

January 2008: 7,800

June 2008: 8,000

April 2009: 9,000

October 2009: 9,500

May 2012: 9,500

2012-2014: Troop numbers gradually declined to roughly 5,000 before full withdrawal.

Roll call of units that served on Operations Herrick 4 – 20

The roll of units and sub-units that served on Operations Herrick 4-20 is based on MOD sources. Brigade strengths are approximate (MOD sources are conflicting over the total numbers of British servicemen deployed in Afghanistan over the period).

Op Herrick 4: 3 PARA Battlegroup Mar – Oct 2006

(Approximate strength: 3,125)

HQ, 16 Air Assault Brigade

Household Cavalry Regiment

3rd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment

7th (Parachute) Regiment Royal Horse Artillery

9th Regiment, Army Air Corps

32nd Regiment Royal Artillery

39 Regiment, Royal Engineers

51 Parachute Squadron, 23 Engineer Regiment (Air Assault) Royal Engineers

29 Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps

13 (Air Assault) Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps

7th Battalion, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

16 Close Support Medical Regiment

Op Herrick 5: 3 Commando Brigade Oct 2006 – Mar 2007

(Approximate strength: 4000)

HQ, 3 Commando Brigade

Peninsula Company, Territorial Army

The Light Dragoons - 1 sqn

45 Commando, Royal Marines

42 Commando, Royal Marines

32nd Regiment Royal Artillery - 1 bty of UAVs

29th Commando Regiment Royal Artillery

9th Regiment, Army Air Corps

28 Engineer Regiment, Royal Engineers

59 Independent Commando Squadron, Royal Engineers

Commando Logistic Regiment

27 Transport Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps

29 Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps

22 Field Hospital, Royal Army Medical Corps

Op Herrick 6: 12 Mechanised Brigade Mar – Oct 2007

(Approximate strength 5,800)

12 Mechanised Brigade Headquarters Signal Squadron

The Light Dragoons

1st Battalion The Grenadier Guards

1st Battalion The Royal Anglian Regiment

1st Battalion The Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters Regiment

26 Engineer Regiment Royal Engineers

19 Regiment Royal Artillery

2 Signal Regiment Royal Signals

4 Logistic Support Regiment Royal Logistic Corps

4 General Support Medical Regiment Royal Army Medical Corps.

Armoured Support Group of the Royal Marines

Second Royal Tank Regiment

3 Regiment, Army Air Corps

9 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Elements of 1 Military Intelligence Brigade

Elements of Joint Civil Military Co-operation (CIMIC) Group

Elements of 1(Fighter) Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of V (Army Co-Operation) Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 18 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 24 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 27 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 30 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 47 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 70 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 3 Force Protection Wing Headquarters, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5 Force Protection Wing Headquarters, Royal Air Force

Elements of 7 Force Protection Wing Headquarters, Royal Air Force

Elements of 2 Squadron of the Royal Air Force Regiment

Elements of 51 Squadron of the Royal Air Force Regiment

Elements of 15 Squadron of the Royal Air Force Regiment

Elements of Mobile Catering Support Unit

Elements of Tactical Medical Wing

Elements of Tactical Armament Squadron

Elements of Tactical Imagery Intelligence Wing

Four hundred and twenty Territorial Army posts were filled in various units

Op Herrick 7: 52 (Lowland) Brigade Oct 2007 – Mar 2008

(Approximate strength 7,700)

52 Infantry Brigade Headquarters and 258 Signal Squadron

846 Naval Air Squadron

Naval Strike Wing

40 Commando Royal Marines

Armoured Support Group, Royal Marines

The Household Cavalry Regiment

1st Battalion Coldstream Guards including elements of Right Flank 1st Battalion Scots Guards

2nd Battalion The Yorkshire Regiment (Green Howards)

1st Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles

4th Regiment, Royal Artillery

36 Engineer Regiment

27 Transport Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

5 General Support Medical Regiment

1 Battalion, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of The King's Royal Hussars

Elements of The Queen's Royal Lancers

Elements of 5th Regiment, Royal Artillery

Elements of 16th Regiment, Royal Artillery

Elements of 32nd Regiment, Royal Artillery

Elements of 39th Regiment, Royal Artillery

Elements of 47th Regiment, Royal Artillery

Elements of 33 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal)

Elements of 70 Gurkha Field Support Squadron

Headquarters 62 Works Group Royal Engineers, 519 Specialist Team Royal Engineers (Works)

Elements of 10th Signal Regiment, The Royal Corps of Signals

Elements of 14th Signal Regiment (Electronic Warfare), The Royal Corps of Signals

Elements of 21st Signal Regiment (Air Support), The Royal Corps of Signals

Elements of 30th Signal Regiment The Royal Corps Signals

Elements of 3 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Elements of 1 Close Support Company, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 7th Battalion, The Rifles

Elements of 52nd Lowland, 6 Battalion, The Royal Regiment of Scotland

Elements of 9 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Headquarters 102 Logistic Brigade

Elements of 9 Supply Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 12 Logistic Support Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 13 Air Assault Support Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps(47 Air Dispatch Squadron)

Elements of 24 Postal Courier and Movement Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 29 Postal Courier and Movement Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 148 Squadron Expeditionary Forces Institute (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Hospital Squadron formed from 201 Field Hospital (V) and 243 Field Hospital (V)

Elements of 7 Air Assault Battalion, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

101 Provost Company, 5th Provost Regiment, Royal Military Police

Elements of 1 Military Intelligence Brigade

Elements of Joint Civil Military Co-operation (CIMIC) Group

Elements of 90 Signals Unit Royal Air Force

904 Expeditionary Air Wing Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Air Control Centre Royal Air Force

15 Regiment Field Squadron Royal Air Force

7 Force Protection Wing Headquarters Royal Air Force

Elements of:

18 Squadron Royal Air Force

24 Squadron Royal Air Force

27 Squadrons Royal Air Force

30 Squadron Royal Air Force

47 Squadron Royal Air Force

70 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Air Movements Wing Royal Air Force

Elements of 85 (Expeditionary Logistic) Wing Headquarters, Royal Air Force

Elements of 2 Motor Transport Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5001 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of Mobile Catering Support Unit

Elements of Tactical Medical Wing

Elements of Tactical Armament Squadron

Elements of Tactical Imagery Intelligence Wing

Elements of 151 Transport Regiment (Volunteers) The Royal Logistic Corps

600 Territorial Army posts were filled in various units.

Op Herrick 8: 16 Air Assault Brigade Mar – Oct 2008

(Approximate strength 8,500)

16 Air Assault Brigade Headquarters and 216 Signal Squadron

Elements of 845 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of 846 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of 847 Naval Air Squadron

7th Parachute Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery

23 Engineer Regiment (Air Assault)

The Royal Highland Fusiliers, 2nd Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland

The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, 5th Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland

1st Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment (27th [Inniskilling], 83rd, 87th and The Ulster Defence Regiment)

2nd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment

3rd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment

The Pathfinder Platoon

6 Supply Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

13 Air Assault Support Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

16 Close Support Medical Regiment

7 Air Assault Battalion, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

156 Independent Provost Company, Royal Military Police

Elements of The Household Cavalry Regiment

Elements of 3rd Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery

Elements of The Royal Scots Dragoon Guards (Carabiniers and Greys)

Elements of The Queen's Royal Lancers

Elements of 5th Regiment, Royal Artillery

Elements of 32nd Regiment, Royal Artillery

Elements of 39th Regiment, Royal Artillery

Elements of 47th Regiment, Royal Artillery

Elements of 33 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal)

Elements of 63 Works Group Royal Engineers

Elements of 42 Engineer Regiment (Geographic)

Elements of 170 (Infrastructure Support) Engineer Group

Elements of 10th Signal Regiment, The Royal Corps of Signals

Elements of 14th Signal Regiment (Electronic Warfare), The Royal Corps of Signals

Elements of 16th Signal Regiment, The Royal Corps of Signals

Elements of 21st Signal Regiment (Air Support), The Royal Corps of Signals

Elements of The Highlanders, 4th Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland

Elements of 3 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Elements of 4 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Elements of 5 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Elements of 9 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Headquarters 104 Logistic Brigade

Elements of 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 2 Logistic Support Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 7 Transport Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 24 Postal Courier and Movement Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 27 Transport Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 29 Postal Courier and Movement Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 2 Close Support Battalion, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 104 Military Working Dog Support Unit, Royal Army Veterinary Corps

Elements of 1 Military Intelligence Brigade

Elements of Joint Civil Military Co-operation (CIMIC) Group

Elements of 15 (UK) Psychological Operations Group

Elements of 4th Battalion, The Duke of Lancaster's Regiment (King's, Lancashire and Border)

Elements of 4th Battalion The Yorkshire Regiment (14th/15th, 19th and 33rd/75th Foot)

Elements of 2nd Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment (27th [Inniskilling], 83rd, 87th and The Ulster Defence Regiment)

Elements of 4th Battalion, The Parachute Regiment

Elements of 148 Expeditionary Forces Squadron, The Royal Logistic Corps (Volunteer)

Hospital Squadron formed from 203 (Welsh) Field Hospital (Volunteers) and 204 (North Irish) Field Hospital (Volunteers)

904 Expeditionary Air Wing Royal Air Force

1 Force Protection Wing Headquarters Royal Air Force

3 Regiment Field Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 4 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 18 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 27 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 30 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 39 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 47 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 70 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Air Movements Wing Royal Air Force

Elements of 85 (Expeditionary Logistic) Wing Headquarters, Royal Air Force

Tactical Supply Wing Royal Air Force

Joint Helicopter Support Unit

Elements of 1 Air Control Centre Royal Air Force

Elements of 90 Signals Unit Royal Air Force

Elements of 2 Motor Transport Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5001 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of Mobile Catering Support Unit

Elements of Tactical Medical Wing

Elements of Tactical Armament Squadron

Elements of Tactical Imagery Intelligence Wing

Op Herrick 9: 3 Commando Brigade Oct 2008 – Mar 2009

(Approximate strength 8,500)

3 Commando Brigade Headquarters, Royal Marines

Elements of the Naval Strike Wing

Elements of 845 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of 846 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of 847 Naval Air Squadron

42 Commando Royal Marines

45 Commando Royal Marines

United Kingdom Landing Force Command and Support Group

Commando Logistic Regiment Royal Marines

1st The Queen's Dragoon Guards

29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery

24 Commando Engineer Regiment

2nd Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles

1st Battalion The Rifles

3 Close Support Battalion, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

114th Provost Company Royal Military Police

Elements of The Queen's Royal Lancers

Elements of 5th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 16th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 26th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 32nd Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 47th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 39th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 32 Engineer Regiment

Elements of 33 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal)

Elements of 35 Engineer Regiment

Elements of 170 (Infrastructure Support) Engineer Group

Elements of 10th Signal Regiment

Elements of 21st Signal Regiment (Air Support)

Elements of 22nd Signal Regiment

Elements of 1st Battalion The Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment

Elements of 7 Transport Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 4 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Headquarters, 104 Logistic Brigade

Elements of 9 Supply Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 11 Explosive Ordnance Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 13 Air Assault Support Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 17 Port and Maritime Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 24 Postal Courier and Movement Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 29 Postal Courier and Movement Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 101 Force Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 103 Military Working Dog Support Unit

Elements of 1 Military Intelligence Brigade

Elements of 4th Battalion The Duke of Lancaster's Regiment (King's, Lancashire and Border)

Elements of 6th Battalion The Rifles

Elements to man 904 Expeditionary Air Wing, Royal Air Force

4 Force Protection Wing Headquarters, Royal Air Force

1 Regiment Field Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 4 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 18 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 27 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 30 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 39 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 70 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements to man the Tactical Supply Wing

Elements to man the Joint Helicopter Support Unit

Elements of 1 Air Movements Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of 85 (Expeditionary Logistic) Wing Headquarters, Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Air Control Centre, Royal Air Force

Elements of 90 Signals Unit, Royal Air Force

Elements of 2 Motor Transport Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5001 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of Mobile Catering Support Unit

Elements of Tactical Medical Wing

Elements of Tactical Armament Squadron

Elements of Tactical Imagery Intelligence Wing

Elements of Joint Medical Command

Op Herrick 10:19 Light Brigade Mar – Oct 2009

(Approximate strength 10,642)

19 Light Brigade Headquarters and Signal Squadron (209)

Elements of 845 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of 846 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of 847 Naval Air Squadron

The Light Dragoons

40th Regiment Royal Artillery

38 Engineer Regiment

1st Battalion The Welsh Guards

The Black Watch, 3rd Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland

2nd Battalion The Mercian Regiment (Worcesters and Foresters)

2nd Battalion The Rifles

19 Combat Service Support Battalion

29 Postal Courier and Movement Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

2 Medical Regiment

4 Close Support Battalion, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

173 Provost Company Royal Military Police

Elements of 2nd Royal Tank Regiment

Elements of 5th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 12th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 19th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 32nd Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 39th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 26 Engineer Regiment

Elements of 33 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal)

Elements of 42 Engineer Regiment (Geographical)

Elements of 170 (Infrastructure Support) Engineer Group

Elements of 15 Field Support Squadron

Elements of 7th Signal Regiment

Elements of 10th Signal Regiment

Elements of 14th Signal Regiment (Electronic Warfare)

Elements of 21st Signal Regiment (Air Support)

Elements of 2nd Battalion The Royal Welsh

Elements of 2nd Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles

Elements of 1 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of 3 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of 4 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of 4 Logistic Support Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 6 Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 7 Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 9 Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 17 Port and Maritime Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 23 Pioneer Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 24 Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 27 Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of Allied Command Europe Rapid Reaction Corps Support Battalion

Elements of 7 Air Assault Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 104 Force Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 101 Military Working Dog Support Unit

Elements of 1 Military Intelligence Brigade

Elements of the Joint Civil Military Co-operation Group (CIMIC)

Elements of 148 Expeditionary Force Institute Squadron (Volunteers) The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 51st Highland, 7th Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland

Elements of 4th Battalion The Mercian Regiment

Elements of Joint Medical Command

Elements of 2 Medical Regiment

Elements of 4 Medical Regiment

Elements of 202 Field Hospital (Volunteers)

Elements of 225 Medical Regiment (Volunteers)

Elements to man 904 Expeditionary Air Wing, Royal Air Force

6 Force Protection Wing Headquarters, Royal Air Force Regiment

63 Queen’s Colour Squadron Royal Air Force Regiment

Elements of 1 (Fighter) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 18 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 24 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 27 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 30 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 617 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of the Tactical Supply Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements to man the Joint Helicopter Support Unit

Elements of 1 Air Movements Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Air Control Centre, Royal Air Force

Elements of 90 Signals Unit, Royal Air Force

Elements of 2 Motor Transport Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5001 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of Mobile Catering Support Unit

Elements of Tactical Medical Wing

Elements of Tactical Armament Squadron

Elements of Tactical Imagery Intelligence Wing

Op Herrick 11: 11 Light Brigade Oct 2009 – Mar 2010

(Approximate strength 10,730)

Headquarters, 6 (UK) Division

11 Light Brigade Headquarters and Signal Squadron (261)

Headquarters, 8 Force Engineer Brigade

Headquarters, 101 Logistic Brigade

Elements of 845 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of 846 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of 857 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of Fleet Diving Unit III

The Household Cavalry Regiment

1st Regiment Royal Horse Artillery

28 Engineer Regiment

1st Battalion The Grenadier Guards

2nd Battalion The Yorkshire Regiment

1st Battalion The Royal Welsh

3rd Battalion The Rifles

10 Queen's Own Ghurkha Logistic Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

33 Field Hospital

104 Force Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

160 Provost Company Royal Military Police

Elements of 1st Royal Tank Regiment

Elements of 2nd Royal Tank Regiment

Elements of 5th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 12th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 16th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 19th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 32nd Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 39th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 33 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal)

Elements of 39 Engineer Regiment (Air Support)

Elements of 42 Engineer Regiment (Geographic)

Elements of 101 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) (Volunteers)

Elements of 170 (Infrastructure Support) Engineer Group

Elements of 2 (National Communications) Signal Brigade

Elements of 1st (United Kingdom) Armoured Division Headquarters & Signal Regiment

Elements of 7th Signal Regiment

Elements of 10th Signal Regiment

Elements of 14th Signals Regiment (Electronic Warfare)

Elements of 21st Signal Regiment (Air Support)

Elements of 1st Battalion The Coldstream Guards

Elements of The Royal Scots Borderers, 1st Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland

Elements of 4th Battalion the Duke of Lancaster's Regiment

Elements of 4th Battalion The Yorkshire Regiment

Elements of 2nd Battalion The Royal Welsh

Elements of 3rd Battalion The Royal Welsh

Elements of 3rd Battalion The Royal Anglian Regiment

Elements of 4th Battalion The Rifles

Elements of 1 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Elements of 3 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Elements of 4 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Elements of 9 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Elements of 9 Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 24 Postal Courier and Movement Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 27 Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 29 Postal Courier and Movement Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of Headquarters Allied Rapid Reaction Corps Support Battalion

Elements of 6 Close Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 7 Air Assault Battalion Royal Electrical Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 102 Military Working Dog Support Unit

Elements of 1 Military Intelligence Brigade

Elements of the Joint Civil Military Co-operation Group (CIMIC)

Elements of 148 Expeditionary Force Institute Squadron (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of Joint Medical Command

Elements of 253 Medical Regiment (Volunteers)

Elements of 254 Medical Regiment (Volunteers)

Elements of 205 Field Hospital (Volunteers)

Elements of 256 Field Hospital (Volunteers)

Number 1 Royal Air Force, Force Protection Wing Headquarters

Number 2 Royal Air Force, Force Protection Wing Headquarters

Number 3 Royal Air Force, Force Protection Wing Headquarters

Number 8 Royal Air Force, Force Protection Wing Headquarters

Elements of Number 3 Royal Air Force Police Wing

2 Squadron, Royal Air Force Regiment

27 Squadron, Royal Air Force Regiment

Elements of 3 Squadron, Royal Air Force Regiment

Elements of 34 Squadron, Royal Air Force Regiment

9 Squadron, Royal Air Force

31 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5 (Army Co-Operation) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 12 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 14 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 18 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 24 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 27 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 28 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 30 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 78 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 617 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of the Tactical Supply Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Air Mobility Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Air Control Centre, Royal Air Force

Elements of 90 Signals Unit, Royal Air Force

Elements of 2(Mechanical Transport) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5001 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 3 Mobile Catering Squadron

Elements of Tactical Medical Wing

Elements of 93 (Expeditionary Armaments) Squadron

Elements of Tactical Imagery Wing

Op Herrick 12: 4th Mechanised Brigade Mar 2010 – Oct 2010

(Approximate strength: 11,964)

Headquarters 6 (UK) Division

4th Mechanised Brigade Headquarters and 204 Signal Squadron

Elements of 52 Infantry Brigade Headquarters and Signal Squadron (258)

Headquarters 101 Logistic Brigade

Headquarters 102 Logistic Brigade

Elements of 845 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of 846 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of 857 Naval Air Squadron

40 Commando Royal Marines

The Royal Dragoon Guards

The Queen's Royal Lancers

4th Regiment Royal Artillery

21 Engineer Regiment

1st Battalion Scots Guards

The Royal Scots Borderers, 1st Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland

1st Battalion The Duke of Lancaster's Regiment

1st Battalion The Mercian Regiment

1st Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles

3 Medical Regiment

34 Field Hospital

12 Logistic Support Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps

1 Close Support Battalion, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

101 Force Support Battalion, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 3rd Regiment Royal Horse Artillery

Elements of 5th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 16th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 32nd Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 39th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 47th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 33 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal)

Elements of 39 Engineer Regiment (Air Support)

Elements of 42 Engineer Regiment (Geographic)

Elements of 170 (Infrastructure Support) Engineer Group

Elements of 2nd Signal Regiment

Elements of 10 Signal Regiment

Elements of 14th Signal Regiment (Electronic Warfare)

Elements of 16th Signal Regiment

Elements of 21st Signal Regiment (Air Support)

Elements of 5th Battalion The Rifles

Elements of 1 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of 4 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of 9 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of 6 Regiment Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 7 Regiment Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 8 Regiment Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 17 Port and Maritime Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 23 Pioneer Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 24 Postal Courier and Movement Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 27 Regiment Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 29 Postal Courier and Movement Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 5th Regiment Royal Military Police

101 Provost Company, Royal Military Police

150 Provost Company, Royal Military Police

Elements of 105 Military Working Dog Support Unit

Elements of 1 Military Intelligence Brigade

Elements of the Military Stabilisation Support Group

Elements of The Honourable Artillery Company

Elements of 100 Regiment Royal Artillery (Volunteers)

Elements of 101 Regiment Royal Artillery (Volunteers)

Elements of 104 Regiment Royal Artillery (Volunteers)

Elements of 106 Regiment Royal Artillery (Volunteers)

Elements of 101 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) (Volunteers)

Elements of 6th Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland (Volunteers)

Elements of 4th Battalion The Duke Of Lancaster's Regiment (Volunteers)

Elements of The London Regiment (Volunteers)

Elements of 150 Transport Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps (Volunteers)

Elements of 159 Supply Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps (Volunteers)

Elements of 160 Transport Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps (Volunteers)

Elements of 148 Expeditionary Force Institute Squadron (Volunteers), Royal Logistic Corps

No 1 RAF Force Protection Wing Headquarters

No 3 RAF Force Protection Wing Headquarters

No 4 RAF Force Protection Wing Headquarters

No 5 RAF Force Protection Wing Headquarters

Elements of No 2 Royal Air Force Police Wing

Elements of No 3 Royal Air Force Police Wing

2 Squadron, Royal Air Force Regiment

51 Squadron, Royal Air Force Regiment

Elements of 1 Squadron, Royal Air Force Regiment

Elements of 3 Squadron, Royal Air Force Regiment

2 Squadron, Royal Air Force

9 Squadron, Royal Air Force

13 Squadron, Royal Air Force

14 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5 (Army Cooperation) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 18 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 24 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 27 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 28 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 30 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 78 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of the Tactical Supply Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of No 1 Air Mobility Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of No 1 Air Control Centre, Royal Air Force

Elements of 90 Signals Unit, Royal Air Force

Elements of 2 (Mechanical Transport) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5001 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 3 (Mobile Catering) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of the Tactical Medical Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of No 1 (Expeditionary Logistics) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 93 (Expeditionary Armament) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of the Tactical Imagery Wing, Royal Air Force.

Op Herrick 13: 16 Air Assault Brigade Oct 2010 – Apr 2011

(Approximate strength: 12,089)

16 Air Assault Brigade Headquarters and Signal Squadron (216 (Parachute) Signal Squadron)

Elements of 1 Mechanised Brigade Headquarters and Signal Squadron (215)

Headquarters, 102 Logistic Brigade

Headquarters, 104 Logistic Support Brigade

Elements of 845 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of 846 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of 847 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of 857 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of the Royal Naval Regulators

Elements of 7th Parachute Regiment Royal Horse Artillery

Elements of 3rd Regiment Royal Horse Artillery

Elements of The Household Cavalry Regiment

Elements of 2nd Royal Tank Regiment

Elements of 5th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 16th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 32nd Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 39th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 47th Regiment Royal Artillery

23 Engineer Regiment (Air Assault)

Elements of 22 Engineer Regiment

Elements of 33 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal)

Elements of 36 Engineer Regiment

Elements of 39 Engineer Regiment (Air Support)

Elements of 42 Engineer Regiment (Geographic)

Elements of 170 (Infrastructure Support) Engineer Group

Elements of 2nd Signal Regiment

Elements of 3rd (UK) Division Headquarters and Signal Regiment

Elements of 10 Signal Regiment

Elements of 14th Signals Regiment (Electronic Warfare)

Elements of 21st Signal Regiment (Air Support)

1st Battalion Irish Guards

The Royal Highland Fusiliers, 2nd Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland

The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, 5th Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland

2nd Battalion The Parachute Regiment

3rd Battalion The Parachute Regiment

1st Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment

Elements of 1 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Elements of 3 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Elements of 4 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Elements of 9 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Elements of 9 Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 13 Air Assault Support Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 23 Pioneer Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 24 Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 27 Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 29 Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

16 Medical Regiment, Royal Army Medical Corps

7 (Air Assault) Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 104 Force Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 6 Close Support Battalion, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

156 Provost Company Royal Military Police

Elements of 158 Provost Company Royal Military Police

Elements of Special Investigations Branch Germany

Elements of the Military Provost Staff and Military Provost Staff (Volunteers)

Elements of 1st Military Working Dog Regiment

Elements of 1 Military Intelligence Brigade

Elements of the Military Stabilisation Support Group (MSSG)

Elements of The Honourable Artillery Company

Elements of 100 Regiment Royal Artillery (Volunteers)

Elements of 101 Regiment Royal Artillery (Volunteers)

Elements of 103 Regiment Royal Artillery (Volunteers)

Elements of 104 Regiment Royal Artillery (Volunteers)

Elements of 105th Regiment Royal Artillery (Volunteers)

Elements of 106 Regiment Royal Artillery (Volunteers)

Elements of 101 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) (Volunteers)

Elements of 51st Highland, 7th Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland (Territorial Army)

Elements of 2nd Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment (Volunteers)

Elements of 4th Battalion The Parachute Regiment (Volunteers)

Elements of The London Regiment (Volunteers)

Elements of The Welsh Transport Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 88 Postal and Courier Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 162 Movement Control Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 166 Supply Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 168 Pioneer Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 148 Expeditionary Force Institute Squadron (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 395 Air Dispatch Troop (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 101 Force Support Battalion, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 103 Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (Volunteers)

207 Field Hospital (Volunteers), Royal Army Medical Corps

212 Field Hospital (Volunteers), Royal Army Medical Corps

Elements of the Joint Medical Command

Number 2 Force Protection Wing Headquarters, Royal Air Force

Number 7 Force Protection Wing Headquarters, Royal Air Force

Elements of Number 2 Royal Air Force Police Wing

Elements of Number 3 Royal Air Force Police Wing

15 Squadron, Royal Air Force Regiment

34 Squadron, Royal Air Force Regiment

Elements of 51 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 101 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 39 Squadron Royal Air Force

12 Squadron, Royal Air Force

14 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5 (Army Cooperation) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 18 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 24 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 27 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 28 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 30 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 78 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of the Tactical Supply Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Air Mobility Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Air Control Centre, Royal Air Force

Elements of 90 Signals Unit, Royal Air Force

Elements of 2 (Mechanical Transport) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5001 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 3 Mobile Catering Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of Tactical Medical Wing

Elements of 1 (Expeditionary Logistics) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 93 (Expeditionary Armaments) Squadron

Elements of Tactical Imagery Intelligence Wing (TIW)

Op Herrick 14: 3 Commando Brigade Apr 2010 – Oct 2011

(Approximate strength: 10,500)

The forces deploying with 3 Commando Brigade include:

3 Commando Brigade Headquarters, Royal Marines

Elements of 30 Commando Information Exploitation Group, Royal Marines

Elements of the Royal Navy forming Headquarters Joint Force Support (Afghanistan),

including members of the Maritime Reserve

Headquarters, 104 Logistic Brigade

Elements of 7 Armoured Brigade Headquarters and Signal Squadron (207)

42 Commando Royal Marines, including members of the Maritime Reserve

45 Commando Royal Marines, including members of the Maritime Reserve

Commando Logistic Regiment, Royal Marines

Elements of the Royal Navy forming the in-theatre Medical Regiment and Field Hospital

Elements of 845 Naval Air Squadron, including members of the Maritime Reserve

Elements of 846 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of 847 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of 857 Naval Air Squadron, including members of the Maritime Reserve

Elements of 854 Naval Air Squadron

Elements of the Royal Naval Regulators

Elements of 3rd Regiment Royal Horse Artillery

Elements of The Royal Scots Dragoon Guards (Carabiniers and Greys)

Elements of 9th/12th Lancers (Prince of Wales's)

29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 5th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 12th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 16th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 26th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 32nd Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 39th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 47th Regiment Royal Artillery

24 Commando Engineer Regiment

Elements of 12 (Air Support) Engineer Group

Elements of 22 Engineer Regiment

Elements of 28 Engineer Regiment

Elements of 32 Engineer Regiment

Elements of 36 Engineer Regiment

Elements of 42 Engineer Regiment (Geographic)

Elements of 101 (City of London) Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal)

Elements of 170 (Infrastructure Support) Engineer Group

Elements of 3rd (UK) Division Headquarters and Signal Regiment

Elements of 10th Signal Regiment

Elements of 14th Signal Regiment (Electronic Warfare)

Elements of 21st Signal Regiment (Air Support)

Elements of 22nd Signal Regiment

4th Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland

3rd Battalion The Mercian Regiment

2nd Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles

1st Battalion The Rifles

Elements of 1 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Elements of 3 Regiment, Army Air Corps

Elements of 2 Logistic Support Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 9 Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 17 Port and Maritime Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 23 Pioneer Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 24 Postal Courier and Movement Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 27 Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 29 Postal Courier and Movement Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

2 Close Support Battalion, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 7 Air Assault Battalion, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 101 Force Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 104 Force Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 5th Regiment Royal Military Police

Elements of 111 Provost Company Royal Military Police

Elements of 114 Provost Company Royal Military Police

Elements of Special Investigations Branch United Kingdom

Elements of 1 Military Working Dogs Regiment

Elements of 1 Military Intelligence Brigade

Elements of the Military Stabilisation Support Group (MSSG)

Elements of 6th Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland (Volunteers)

Elements of 4th Battalion The Mercian Regiment (Volunteers)

Elements of 6th Battalion The Rifles (Volunteers)

Elements of 88 Postal and Courier Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 151 (London) Transport Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 158 (Royal Anglian) Transport Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 162 Movement Control Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 166 Supply Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 148 Expeditionary Force Institute Squadron (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 383 Commando Petroleum Troop (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 395 Air Despatch Troop (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 102 Battalion (Volunteers), Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of the Military Provost Staff and Military Provost Staff (Volunteers)

Elements of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force

Number 6 Royal Air Force, Force Protection Wing Headquarters

Elements of HQ Royal Air Force Police Wing

58 Squadron, Royal Air Force Regiment

617 Squadron, Royal Air Force

31 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5 (Army Co-operation) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 18 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 24 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 27 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 28 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 30 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 78 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of the Tactical Supply Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Air Mobility Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Air Control Centre, Royal Air Force

Elements of 90 Signals Unit, Royal Air Force

Elements of 2 (Mechanical Transport) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5001 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 3 Mobile Catering Squadron

Elements of Tactical Medical Wing

Elements of 1 (Expeditionary Logistics) Squadron

Elements of 93 (Expeditionary Armaments) Squadron

Elements of Tactical Imagery Wing

Elements of Joint Ground Based Air Defence

Elements of Defence HUMINT Unit

Elements of the Joint Support Chain Services

Op Herrick 15: 20 Armoured Brigade Oct 2011- Apr 2012

(Approximate strength: 10,000)

20th Armoured Brigade Headquarters and Signal Squadron (200)

Elements of 19th Light Brigade Headquarters and Signal Squadron (209)

Headquarters 101 Logistic Brigade

Elements of 845 Naval Air Squadron including members of the Maritime Reserve

Elements of 846 Naval Air Squadron

857 Naval Air Squadron

1st The Queen’s Dragoon Guards

The Queen’s Royal Hussars (The Queen’s Own and Royal Irish)

Elements of 5th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 16th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 26th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 39th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 40th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 47th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 25 Engineer Regiment

35 Engineer Regiment

Elements of 38 Engineer Regiment

Elements of 71 Engineer Regiment (Volunteers)

Elements of 12 (Air Support) Engineer Group

Elements of 170 (Infrastructure Support) Engineer Group

Elements of 1st (United Kingdom) Armoured Division Headquarters and Signal Regiment

Elements of 10th Signal Regiment

Elements of 14th Signal Regiment (Electronic Warfare)

Elements of 21st Signal Regiment (Air Support)

Elements of 22nd Signal Regiment

3rd Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland (The Black Watch)

1st Battalion The Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment (Queen's and Royal Hampshires)

1st Battalion The Yorkshire Regiment (Prince of Wales's Own)

2nd Battalion The Mercian Regiment (Worcesters and Foresters)

2nd Battalion The Rifles

5th Battalion The Rifles

Elements of 1 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of 3 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of 4 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of 9 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of Joint Helicopter Support Squadron

Elements of Allied Rapid Reaction Corps Support Battalion

1 Logistic Support Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 6 Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 7 Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 8 Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 9 Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 17 Port and Maritime Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 23 Pioneer Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 29 Regiment The Royal Logistic Corps

1 Medical Regiment

Elements of 201 Field Hospital (Volunteers)

Elements of 208 Field Hospital (Volunteers)

3 Close Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 19 Light Brigade Combat Service Support Battalion

Elements of 101 Force Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 104 Force Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

110 Provost Company Royal Military Police

Elements of 173 Provost Company Royal Military Police

Elements of Special Investigation Branch United Kingdom

Elements of 1st Military Working Dog Regiment

Elements of 1 Military Intelligence Brigade

Elements of 15 Psychological Operations Group

Elements of 88 Postal and Courier Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 148 Expeditionary Force Institute Squadron (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 156 Transport Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 159 Supply Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 162 Postal Courier and Movement Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 166 Supply Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

602 Tactical Air Control Party

603 Tactical Air Control Party

606 Tactical Air Control Party

618 Tactical Air Control Party

Number 3 Royal Air Force, Force Protection Wing Headquarters

Elements of Number 2 Royal Air Force Police Wing

Elements of Number 3 Royal Air Force Police Wing

II Squadron Royal Air Force Regiment

Elements of 101 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 39 Squadron Royal Air Force

31 Squadron Royal Air Force

IX(B) Squadron Royal Air Force

2 (Army Co-operation) Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 5 (Army Co-operation) Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 18 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 24 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 27 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 28 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 30 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 78 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of the Tactical Supply Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Air Mobility Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Air Control Centre, Royal Air Force

Elements of 90 Signals Unit, Royal Air Force

Elements of 2 (Mechanical Transport) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5001 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 3 Mobile Catering Squadron

Elements of Tactical Medical Wing

Elements of 1 (Expeditionary Logistics) Squadron

Elements of 93 (Expeditionary Armaments) Squadron

Elements of Tactical Imagery-Intelligence Wing

Elements of 5131(BD) Squadron

Op Herrick 16: 12 Mechanised Brigade Apr 2012 – Oct 2012

(Approximate strength: 10,000)

12th Mechanised Brigade Headquarters and Signal Squadron (228)

Elements of 19th Light Brigade Headquarters

Headquarters 102 Logistic Brigade

857 Naval Air Squadron

The King's Royal Hussars

The Light Dragoons

Elements of 1st Royal Tank Regiment

Elements of The Royal Wessex Yeomanry

19th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 5th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 12th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 16th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 32nd Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 39th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 40th Regiment Royal Artillery

26 Engineer Regiment

Elements of The Royal Monmouthshire Royal Engineers (Militia)

Elements of 21 Engineer Regiment

Elements of 33 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal)

Elements of 36 Engineer Regiment (Search)

Elements of 38 Engineer Regiment

Elements of 42 Engineer Regiment (Geographical)

Elements of The Military Stabilisation Support Group

Elements of 170 (Infrastructure Support) Engineer Group

16th Signal Regiment

Elements of 10th Signal Regiment

Elements of 14th Signal Regiment (Electronic Warfare)

Elements of 21st Signal Regiment (Air Support)

1st Battalion The Grenadier Guards

1st Battalion The Welsh Guards

1st Battalion The Royal Anglian Regiment

3rd Battalion The Yorkshire Regiment

1st Battalion The Royal Welsh

3rd Battalion The Rifles

Elements of The London Regiment

Elements of 3rd Battalion The Royal Anglian Regiment

Elements of 4th Battalion The Yorkshire Regiment

Elements of 3rd Battalion The Royal Welsh

Elements of 6th Battalion The Rifles

Elements of 3 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of 4 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of 6 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of 9 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of Joint Helicopter Support Squadron

Elements of Allied Rapid Reaction CorpsSupport Battalion

4 Logistic Support Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

10 The Queen's Own Gurkha Logistic Regiment

Elements of 9 Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 17 Port and Maritime Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 23 Pioneer Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 24 Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 27 Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 29 Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 88 Postal and Courier Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 148 Expeditionary Force Institute Squadron (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 152 Transport Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 159 Supply Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 162 Movement Control Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 166 Supply Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 151 Transport Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of the Catering Support Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of the Operational Headquarters Support Group (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

4 Medical Regiment

22nd Field Hospital

Elements of 254 Medical Regiment (Volunteers)

4th Close Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 104 Force Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

174 Provost Company Royal Military Police

Elements of 160 Provost Company Royal Military Police

Elements of Special Investigations Branch United Kingdom

Elements of The Military Provost Staff

Elements of 1st Military Working Dog Regiment

Elements of 1st Military Intelligence Battalion

Elements of 2nd Military Intelligence Battalion

Elements of 3rd Military Intelligence Battalion

Elements of 4th Military Intelligence Battalion

Elements of 5th Military Intelligence Battalion

Elements of The Defence Cultural Specialist Unit

Elements of 15 Psychological Operations Group

604 Tactical Air Control Party

614 Tactical Air Control Party

621 Tactical Air Control Party

632 Tactical Air Control Party

II (Army Cooperation) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 24 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 30 Squadron, Royal Air Force

12 (Bomber) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5 (Army Cooperation) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 32 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 28 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 216 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 101 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 39 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 27 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 18 Squadron, Royal Air Force

617 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 99 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 78 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Number 5 Royal Air Force, Force Protection Wing Headquarters

Elements of Number 2 Royal Air Force Police Wing

Elements of Number 3 Royal Air Force Police Wing

51 Squadron, Royal Air Force Regiment

Elements of the Tactical Supply Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Air Mobility Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Air Control Centre, Royal Air Force

Elements of 90 Signals Unit, Royal Air Force

Elements of 2 (Mechanical Transport) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5001 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 3 Mobile Catering Squadron

Elements of Tactical Medical Wing

Elements of 1 (Expeditionary Logistics) Squadron

Elements of 93 (Expeditionary Armaments) Squadron

Elements of Tactical Imagery-Intelligence Wing

Elements of 5131 (Bomb Disposal) Squadron

Op Herrick 17: 4 Mechanised Brigade Oct 2012 – Apr 2013

(Approximate strength: 9,500)

4th Mechanised Brigade Headquarters and Signal Squadron (204)

Headquarters 104 Logistic Support Brigade

40 Commando Royal Marines

Elements of 847 Naval Air Squadron

857 Naval Air Squadron

The Royal Dragoon Guards

The Queen's Royal Lancers

4th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 5th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 16th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 32nd Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 39th Regiment Royal Artillery

21 Engineer Regiment

Elements of 28 Engineer Regiment

Elements of 36 Engineer Regiment (Search)

Elements of 42 Engineer Regiment (Geographic)

Elements of 101 (City of London) Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal)

Elements of 170 (Infrastructure Support) Engineer Group

2nd Signal Regiment

Elements of 10th Signal Regiment

Elements of 14th Signal Regiment (Electronic Warfare)

Elements of 15th Signal Regiment (Information Support)

Elements of 21st Signal Regiment (Air Support)

1st Battalion Scots Guards

1st Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland

1st Battalion The Duke of Lancaster's Regiment

1st Battalion The Mercian Regiment

1st Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles

Elements of 1 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of 3 Regiment Army Air Corps

7 Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 6 Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

12 Logistic Support Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 9 Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 17 Port and Maritime Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 23 Pioneer Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 29 Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

3 Medical Regiment

1st Close Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 7 Air Assault Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 101 Force Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

150 Provost Company Royal Military Police

Elements of 101 Provost Company Royal Military Police

Elements of Special Investigations Branch (United Kingdom)

Elements of The Military Provost Staff

Elements of 1st Military Working Dog Regiment

Elements of 1 Military Intelligence Battalion

Elements of 2 Military Intelligence (Exploitation) Battalion

Elements of 4 Military Intelligence Battalion

Elements of The Military Stabilisation and Support Group

Elements of 15 Psychological Operations Group

Elements of The Defence Cultural Specialist Unit

Elements of The Honourable Artillery Company

Elements of The Royal Mercian and Lancastrian Yeomanry

Elements of 101 Regiment Royal Artillery (Volunteers)

Elements of 75 Engineer Regiment (Volunteers)

Elements of 32nd Signal Regiment (Volunteers)

Elements of 6th Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland

Elements of 3rd Battalion The Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment

Elements of 4th Battalion The Duke of Lancaster's Regiment

Elements of 4th Battalion The Mercian Regiment

Elements of The London Regiment

Elements of 148 Expeditionary Force Institute Squadron, The Royal Logistic Corps (Volunteers)

Elements of 150 (Yorkshire) Transport Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 159 Supply Regiment (Volunteers), The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 204 (Northern Irish) Field Hospital (Volunteers)

Elements of 243 (Wessex) Field Hospital (Volunteers)

Elements of 102 Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (Volunteers)

Elements of 103 Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (Volunteers)

Elements of 5th Regiment Royal Military Police

2 (Army Co-operation) Squadron, Royal Air Force

31 Squadron, Royal Air Force

9 (Bomber) Squadron, Royal Air Force

15 Squadron Royal Air Force Regiment

Number 7 Force Protection Wing Headquarters, Royal Air Force

Number 2 Tactical Police Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 47 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 30 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5 (Army Co-operation) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 32 (The Royal) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 28 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 216 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 39 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 27 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 18 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 99 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 78 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 90 Signals Unit, Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Air Control Centre, Royal Air Force

Elements of 33 (Engineering) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of Tactical Supply Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of 1 Air Mobility Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of Tactical Medical Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of 2 (Mechanical Transport) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 93 (Expeditionary Armaments) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of Engineering and Logistics Wing, Royal Air Force Odiham

Op Herrick 18: 1 Mechanised Brigade Apr 2013 – Oct 2013

(Approximate strength: 9,000)

1st Mechanised Brigade Headquarters and Signal Squadron (215)

847 Naval Air Squadron

857 Naval Air Squadron

Household Cavalry Regiment

1st Regiment Royal Horse Artillery

2nd Royal Tank Regiment

Elements of 5th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 16th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 32nd Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 39th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 47th Regiment Royal Artillery

22 Engineer Regiment

Elements of 23 Engineer Regiment (Air Assault)

Elements of 33 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal)

Elements of 36 Engineer Regiment (Search)

Elements of 42 Engineer Regiment (Geographic)

Elements of 170 (Infrastructure Support) Engineer Group

Elements of 3rd (United Kingdom) Division Headquarters and Signal Regiment

Elements of 10th Signal Regiment

Elements of 14th Signal Regiment (Electronic Warfare)

Elements of 15th Signal Regiment (Information Support)

Elements of 21st Signal Regiment (Air Support)

Elements of 1st Battalion Irish Guards

2nd Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland

2nd Battalion The Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment

1st Battalion The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers

4th Battalion The Rifles

Elements of 1 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of 3 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of 9 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of Joint Helicopter Support Squadron

3 Logistic Support Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

9 Theatre Logistic Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 17 Port and Maritime Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 23 Pioneer Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 24 Postal Courier and Movement Control Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 29 Postal Courier and Movement Control Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps

5 Medical Regiment

33 Field Hospital

6 Close Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 7 Air Assault Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 104 Force Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

158 Provost Company Royal Military Police

Elements of 156 Provost Company Royal Military Police

Elements of Special Investigations Branch (United Kingdom) Royal Military Police

Elements of Military Provost Staff Corps

Elements of 1st Military Working Dog Regiment

Elements of 2 Military Intelligence (Exploitation) Battalion

Elements of 4 Military Intelligence Battalion

Elements of the Military Stabilisation Support Group

Elements of 15 (United Kingdom) Psychological Operations Group

Elements of the Defence Cultural Specialist Unit

Elements of The Royal Yeomanry

Elements of 104th Regiment Royal Artillery (Volunteers)

Elements of 106th (Yeomanry) Regiment Royal Artillery (Volunteers)

Elements of 72 (Tyne Electrical Engineers) Engineer Regiment (Volunteers)

Elements of 71st (City of London) Yeomanry Signal Regiment (Volunteers)

Elements of 7th Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland

Elements of 4th Battalion The Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment

Elements of 5th Battalion The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers

Elements of 4th Battalion The Parachute Regiment

Elements of 7th Battalion The Rifles

Elements of the Scottish Transport Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps (Volunteers)

Elements of the Welsh Transport Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps (Volunteers)

Elements of 88 Postal and Courier Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps (Volunteers)

Elements of 159 Supply Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps (Volunteers)

Elements of 148 Expeditionary Force Institute Squadron, The Royal Logistic Corps (Volunteers)

Elements of 103 Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (Volunteers)

Elements of 3 Military Intelligence Battalion (Volunteers)

Elements of 5 Military Intelligence Battalion (Volunteers)

31 Squadron, Royal Air Force

12 (Bomber) Squadron, Royal Air Force

2 Squadron Royal Air Force Regiment

3 Squadron Royal Air Force Regiment

Number 3 RAF Force Protection Wing Headquarters

Number 2 Tactical Police Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 47 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 30 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 5 (Army Co-operation) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 32 (The Royal) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 28 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 216 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 39 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 13 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 27 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 18 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 51 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 99 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 78 Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 33 (Engineering) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 90 Signals Unit, Royal Air Force

Elements of Number 1 Air Control Centre, Royal Air Force

Elements of Tactical Supply Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of Number 1 Air Mobility Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of Tactical Medical Wing, Royal Air Force

Elements of 2 (Mechanical Transport) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of 93 (Expeditionary Armament) Squadron, Royal Air Force

Elements of Engineering Logistics Wing, RAF Odiham

Op Herrick 19: 7 Armoured Brigade Oct 2013 – June 2014

(Approximate strength: 6,000)

7th Armoured Brigade Headquarters and Signal Squadron (207)

Headquarters 101 Logistic Brigade

857 Naval Air Squadron

3rd Regiment Royal Horse Artillery

The Royal Scots Dragoon Guards

9th/12th Royal Lancers

Elements of the Queen’s Own Yeomanry

Elements of 5th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 14th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 16th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 32nd Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 39th Regiment Royal Artillery

Elements of 47th Regiment Royal Artillery

32 Engineer Regiment

63 Works Group Royal Engineers

Elements of 36 Engineer Regiment (Search)

Elements of 42 Engineer Regiment (Geographic)

Elements of 101 (City of London) Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal)

Elements of 10th Signal Regiment

Elements of 14th Signal Regiment (Electronic Warfare)

Elements of 15th Signal Regiment (Information Support)

Elements of 21st Signal Regiment (Air Support)

Elements of 30th Signal Regiment

Elements of 39th (Skinners) Signal Regiment

1st Battalion Coldstream Guards

4th Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland

2nd Battalion The Royal Anglian Regiment

3rd Battalion The Mercian Regiment

Elements of 3rd Battalion The Royal Anglian Regiment

Elements of 3rd Battalion The Royal Welsh

Elements of 4 Regiment Army Air Corps

Elements of 9 Regiment Army Air Corps

2 Logistic Support Regiment Royal Logistic Corps

27 Theatre Logistic Regiment Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 7 Theatre Logistic Regiment Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 29 Regiment Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 151 (London) Transport Regiment Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 158 (Royal Anglian) Transport Regiment Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 162 Movement Control Regiment Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 159 Supply Regiment Royal Logistic Corps

Elements of 148 Expeditionary Force Institute Squadron Royal Logistic Corps

2 Medical Regiment

202 (Midlands) Field Hospital

203 (Welsh) Field Hospital

2 Close Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 7 Air Assault Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 101 Force Support Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

Elements of 103 Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

111 Provost Company Royal Military Police

Elements of 114 Provost Company Royal Military Police

Elements of the Special Investigation Branch Royal Military Police

Elements of the Military Provost Staff Corps

Elements of 1st Military Working Dog Regiment

Elements of 1 Military Intelligence Battalion

Elements of 2 Military Intelligence (Exploitation) Battalion

2 (Army Cooperation) Squadron Royal Air Force

617 Squadron Royal Air Force

51 Squadron Royal Air Force Regiment

58 Squadron Royal Air Force Regiment

Number 5 Royal Air Force, Force Protection Wing Headquarters

Number 2 (Tactical) Police Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 24 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 30 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 32 (The Royal) Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 216 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 39 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 13 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 27 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 51 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 99 Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 33 (Engineering) Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 90 Signals Unit Royal Air Force

Elements of Number 1 Air Control Centre Royal Air Force

Elements of Tactical Supply Wing Royal Air Force

Elements of Number 1 Air Mobility Wing Royal Air Force

Elements of Tactical Medical Wing Royal Air Force

Elements of Number 1 Royal Air Force Police Wing

Elements of Number 2 Royal Air Force Police Wing

Elements of Number 2 (Mechanical Transport) Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of 93 (Expeditionary Armament) Squadron Royal Air Force

Elements of Engineering Logistics Wing, Royal Air Force Odiham

Op Herrick 20: 20 Armoured Brigade Jun 2014 – Oct 2014

(Approximate strength: 5,200 declining to zero)

The last Herrick rotation ran from 30 June to 31 October, after which point Operation Toral superseded Operation Herrick. Roughly 5,200 troops deployed.

Major units included:

Queen’s Dragoon Guards

Queen’s Royal Hussars

1 Coldstream Guards (Kabul)

1 Princess of Wales’s Royal Regiment

2 Rifles

5 Rifles

26 Regiment RA

35 Engineer Regiment

1 Logistic Support Regiment

3 Battalion REME, 1 (UK) ADSR, 1 Medical Regiment.

[1] McNamara, Robert (1996). *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*. Random House Digital, Inc. p. 576.

ISBN 9780679767497

[2] *Terrorist attacks in the United States*, the Defence Secretary’s speech to the Commons, 14 September 2001.

[3] The sting was carried out by Dispatches, Channel 4.

[4] A story covered by *Jane’s*, the defence journal publishers.

[5] Cordesman, Anthony, DEFENDING AMERICA REDEFINING THE CONCEPTUAL BORDERS OF HOMELAND DEFENSE, 19 September 2001.

[6] *The 9/11 Commission Report’*, p. 45.

[7] Ibid, p. 39.

[8] By *The 9/11 Commission Report*. The fatwa was: Al Quds Al Arabi, *Text of World Islamic Front’s Statement Urging Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders*, 23 February 1998.

[9] Ayman al Zawahiri and Abu Yasir Rifa’i Ahmad Taha, leaders of Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the Egyptian Islamic Group, respectively. The third was a Pakistani, Mir Hamzah, described as a secretary of Jamiat ul Ulema e Pakistan. And the last was a Bangladeshi, Fazlul Rahman, the leader of his country’s Jihad Movement.

[10] Statement by Director of Central Intelligence, George J. Tenet, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on “The Worldwide Threat in 2000: Global Realities of Our National Security,” as prepared for delivery, 21 March 2000.

[11] PBS Frontline report, *Hunting Bin laden*, May 1998.

[12] *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 58

[13] Peter L. Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Knew, An Oral History of Al-Qaeda’s Leader*, Free press, 2006, p. 36.

[14] *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 59.

[15] *Usama Bin Ladin Trying to Develop WMD Capability*? CTC 97-30002 Jan 6 1997.

[16] The full name was *Jam’at Qaedat Ansar Allah* or The Base Group of Allah Supporters.

[17] Peter L. Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Knew, An Oral History of Al-Qaeda’s Leader*, Free press, 2006, p. 83.

[18] Steve Coll, *The Bin Ladens, The Story of a Family and its Fortune*, Penguin Group, 2008, p. 413.

[19] *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p.109.

[20] Ibid, p.109.

[21] An argument made by Adam Curtis, the documentary-maker and author.

[22] *The 9/11 Commission Report* , p. 129.

[23] Ibid, p.140.

[24] Ibid, p.183.

[25] Ibid, p.170.

[26] Ibid, p.146.

[27] http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/11/aqis_announces_death.php

[28] For missed opportunities on the 9/11 attacks see http://www.historycommons.org/essay.jsp?article=essaytheytriedtowarnus

[29] Broadcast on Al Jazeera television, 1 November 2004.

[30] KSM interrogation report 5 April 2005, cited in footnote 51, Ch 4 of *The 9/11 Commission Report*.

[31] Some funders were tracked down. For example, a Malaysian businessman called Yazid Suffat was identified as the person who provided the funds for Moussaoui. Following the attacks, as many as 2,500 individuals or companies were black-listed by the US Office of Foreign Assets Control for presumed links with Islamic terrorism. See Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda, Global Network of Terror*, Berkley Books, 2002, pp. 88-92.

[32] *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 124.

[33] Ibid, p. 134.

[34] Defence Secretary's speech in the Commons, 4 October 2001.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Williams, Brian Glyn (2010) 'Dostum and the Mazar i Sharif Campaign: new light on the role of the Northern Alliance warlords in Operation Enduring Freedom', Small Wars & Insurgencies, 4, 610-632.

[37] US Presidential address to the nation, 7 October 2001.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Broadcast on Channel 4 News following the fall of Kabul.

[40] Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda, Global Network of Terror*, Berkley Books, 2002, p. 303.

[41] Williams, Brian Glyn (2010) 'Dostum and the Mazar i Sharif Campaign: new light on the role of the Northern Alliance warlords in Operation Enduring Freedom', Small Wars & Insurgencies, 4, p. 617.

[42] *Janes International Review*, August 2001, pp. 14-17.

[43] *Janes International Review*, 'How the Afghan War was won', Anthony Davis, February 2001.

[44] Williams, Brian Glyn (2010) 'Dostum and the Mazar i Sharif Campaign: new light on the role of the Northern Alliance warlords in Operation Enduring Freedom', Small Wars & Insurgencies, 4, p. 616.

[45] Anthony Cordesman, *The emerging strike patterns in the air war in Afghanistan*, 20 October 2001.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

[49] *Janes International Review*, 'How the Afghan War was won', Anthony Davis, February 2001.

[50] Ibid.

[51] CENTCOM Tommy Franks would insist that the aim of the operation was to dismantle al-Qaeda, but it is difficult not to view the decapitation of its leader as central to this mission.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Williams, Brian Glyn (2010) 'Dostum and the Mazar i Sharif Campaign: new light on the role of the Northern Alliance warlords in Operation Enduring Freedom', Small Wars & Insurgencies, 4, p. 626

[54] *Janes International Review*, 'How the Afghan War was won', Anthony Davis, February 2001.

[55] Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban*, I.B. Taurus and Co Lt, 2010, p. 221

[56] *Janes International Review*, 'How the Afghan War was won', Anthony Davis, February 2001.

[57] Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban*, I.B. Taurus and Co Lt, 2010, p 223.

[58] Martin, Michael, KCL Doctoral Thesis, *War on its Head, An oral history of the Helmandi conflict 1978-2012*, January 2013, p. 149.

[59] Carl Forsberg, Institute for the Study of War, *The Taliban's Campaign for Kandahar,* 2009, p. 18.

[60] Martin, Michael, KCL Doctoral Thesis, *War on its Head, An oral history of the Helmandi conflict 1978-2012*, January 2013, pp. 148-150

[61] Ibid.

[62] Anthony Cordesman, *The Air War Lessons of Afghanistan: Change and Continuity*, December 2001, p. 62. 'Nothing that US and allied forces did…has shown that the US and its Western allies have a solution to the problems associated with combating an enemy whose forces are dispersed, fluid, and not seeking a conventional fight.'

[63] Ibid, p. 23.

[64] Anthony Cordesman, *The Lessons of Afghanistan: A First Analysis*, February 2002.

[65] PNS News Agency report, 27 April 2002.

[66] Anthony Cordesman, *The Air War Lessons of Afghanistan: Change and Continuity*, December 2001, p. 29.

[67] Ibid, p. 30.

[68] Central Command.

[69] Ibid, p. 35.

[70] Ibid, p. 35.

[71] 2,800 JDAMs, Ibid, p. 36.

[72] Ibid, p. 37.

[73] Ibid, p. 37.

[74] Lord Roberts of Kandahar, *41 Years in India*.

[75] Some reporting suggested that these were Marines serving in the Special Boat Service (SBS) rather than Special Air Service (SAS) troopers. It is believed that there were in fact six soldiers, 2 from 22 SAS and 4 from the SBS.

[76] This 'incident' in fact lasted four days and there are numerous conflicting accounts of the sequence of events. The chief charge against the Northern Alliance and Western forces is that they took part in an unjustified massacre of prisoners. This is rebutted by the argument that there was fanatical resistance and prisoners armed themselves from the fort armoury.

[77] www.landmines.org

[78] Anthony Cordesman, *The Air War Lessons of Afghanistan: Change and Continuity*, December 2001, p.142.

[79] January 2002.

[80] Al Jazeera, 1 November 2004

[81] Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban*, I.B. Taurus and Co ltd, pp. 218- 219.

[82] Abdullah vs. Karzai, *The New Republic*, 3 November 2009.

[83] See Jack Fairweather, *The Good War, The Battle for Afghanistan 2006-2014*, Jonathan Cape 2014, p.39.

[84] See Giustozzi, Antonio, *Good State vs 'Bad Warlords'? A Critique of State-Building Strategies in Afghanistan*, Working paper no 51, Crisis Research Centre LSE, October 2004.

[85] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/3542372.stm

[86] The Brookings Institution, *Are we winning the war on terrorism? A report from Afghanistan*, 19 January 2006.

[87] *Hansard*, International Security Force Assistance for Kabul, 10 January 2002.

[88] See Jack Fairweather, *The Good War, The Battle for Afghanistan 2006-2014*, Jonathan Cape 2014.

[89] Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, New Zealand, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, Belgium, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic.

[90] Horne, Alistair, *A Savage War of Peace: Alegria 1954 – 1962*, Pan Books, 1997. p. 49.

[91] MOD figures.

[92] Ibid.

[93] *Hansard*, 'The Secretary of State for Defence's statement in the Commons', 18 March 2002.

[94] Ibid.

[95] *Hansard*, 'The Secretary of State for Defence's statement in the Commons', 20 March 2002.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid.

[98] *Hansard*, 'The Secretary of State for Defence's statement in the Commons', 18 March 2002.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Ibid.

[101] MOD media release, Operation Snipe, no date.

[102] *The Scotsman*, an article by Chris Stephen, 'Startled Afghan Men All Made Up to See Them', 24 May 2002.

[103] Barbara J. Stapleton, *A Means to What End? Why PRTs are peripheral to the bigger political challenges in Afghanistan*, Journal of Military and Strategic Studies, Fall 2007, Vol 10, Issue 1.

[104] Anthony Cordesman, *The Lessons of Afghanistan: A First Analysis*, February 2002

[105] DOD figures, June 2002.

[106] Fry evidence to Defence Committee, 8 February 2011.

[107] NATO press release 127, 21 November 2002.

[108] Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban*, I.B Taurus Ltd and Co, 2010, p. 225.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Jack Fairweather, *The Good War, The Battle for Afghanistan 2006-2014*, Jonathan Cape 2014, pp. 126-127.

[111] Barbara J. Stapleton, *A Means to What End? Why PRTs are peripheral to the bigger political challenges in Afghanistan*,. Journal of Military and Strategic Studies, Fall 2007, Vol 10, Issue 1.

[112] Biljert van, Martine, Kouvo, Sari, *Snapshots of an Intervention, The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance (2001-11)*, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2012, Ch 4, p. 29.

[113] Gerald F. Hyman, *Afghanistan after the Drawdown, U.S. Civilian Engagement in Afghanistan Post-2014*, CSIS, April 2014.

[114] Berlin Declaration 1 April 2004.

[115] Ibid.

[116] *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, 'Combating Afghani heroin trafficking', 18 May 2004.

[117] Jack Fairweather, *The Good War, The Battle for Afghanistan 2006-2014*, Jonathan Cape 2014, p.144.

[118] Biljert van, Martine, Kouvo, Sari, *Snapshots of an Intervention, The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance (2001-11)*, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2012, Ch 4, p. 30.

[119] *ISAF Mirror* January 2005.

[120] Biljert van, Martine, Kouvo, Sari, *Snapshots of an Intervention, The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance (2001-11)*, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2012, Ch 4, p. 26.

[121] *ISAF Mirror* September 2005.

[122] 51.5 per cent - MOD figures.

[123] Biljert van, Martine, Kouvo, Sari, *Snapshots of an Intervention, The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance (2001-11)*, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2012, Ch 4, p. 55.

[124] DfID and all following data in this paragraph.

[125] Gerald F. Hyman, *Afghanistan after the Drawdown, U.S. Civilian Engagement in Afghanistan Post-2014*, CSIS, April 2014.

[126] MOD figures.

[127] CRS Report for US Congress, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan and Other Global on Terror.*

[128] WTO figures.

[129] Biljert van, Martine, Kouvo, Sari, *Snapshots of an Intervention, The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance (2001-11)*, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2012, Ch 4, pp.69-72.

[130] Antonio Giustozzi, *Re-building the Afghan Army*, June 2003.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Biljert van, Martine, Kouvo, Sari, *Snapshots of an Intervention, The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance (2001-11)*, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2012, Ch 4, p. 30.

[133] *ISAF Mirror* March 2005.

[134] www.landmines.org

[135] *Janes Intelligence Review*, 'Increasing Afghan IED threat gives forces cause for concern', 19 July 2006.

[136] *ISAF Mirror*, July 2008.

[137] This unit confusingly appeared to start its deployment as Operation Herrick 3, but became merged into Operation Herrick 4.

[138] Richards, David, *Taking Command*. Headline Publishing Group, 2014, p.182.

[139] Reid evidence to Defence Select Committee, 8 February 2011.

[140] Ibid.

[141] See Fergusson 'A Million Bullets'.

[142] Richards evidence to Defence Select Committee, 11 May 2011.

[143] *Taking Command*, p.186.

[144] See Tom Coghlan *Afghan expect record opium poppy crop and the Taliban will reap the rewards*, The Independent, 11 May 2006.

[145] Brigadier Nick Carleton-Smith, 16 Air Assault Brigade.

[146] Mike Jackson evidence to Defence Select Committee, 5 May 2011.

[147] Rory Stewart, Chair, Defence Select Committer, 6 January 2015.

[148] Ed Butler, Defence Committee Oral evidence: Decision making in Defence Policy, HC 682 Tuesday 16 December 2014.

[149] Ed Butler (2015) Setting Ourselves up for a Fall in Afghanistan, The RUSI Journal, 160:1, 46-57, DOI:10.1080/03071847.2015.1016742.

[150] Reid evidence to Defence Select Committee, 8 February 2011.

[151] Defence Committee, Decision making in Defence Policy, HC 682. Dec 14-Jan 15.

[152] Fry evidence to Defence Select Committee, 8 February 2011.

[153] Jack Fairweather, *The Good War, The Battle for Afghanistan 2006-2014*, Jonathan Cape 2014, pp.147-148.

[154] Houghton evidence to Defence Committee, 11 May 2011.

[155] Jack Fairweather, *The Good War, The Battle for Afghanistan 2006-2014*, Jonathan Cape 2014, Ch 12.

[156] Richard North, *Ministry of Defeat*, Continuum UK, 2009, p. 76.

[157] See *The Times*, 14 January 2011.

[158] Brigadier Andrew McKay.

[159] *The Times*, 9 June 2010.

[160] *The Times*, 5 April 2014.

[161] DfID figures are very confusing on this point. How much the British government actually spent on the failed counter-narcotics program is difficult to say.

[162] Barbara J. Stapleton, *A Means to What End? Why PRTs are peripheral to the bigger political challenges in Afghanistan*. Journal of Military and Strategic Studies, Fall 2007, Vol 10, Issue 1.

[163] Ibid, p. 23.

[164] Linda Polman, *War Games: The Study of Aid and War in Modern Times*, Viking 2010.

[165] Ibid, p. 33.

[166] Ibid, p. 49.

[167] Reportedly said to a *Daily Telegraph* journalist.

[168] *Roberts in India*, The military papers of Lord Roberts, 1876-1893, Military Records Society, p. 211.

[169] Ibid., p. 314.

[170] Ibid., p.323.

[171] *The Economist*, 'The last frontier', 2 January 2010.

[172] In fact, the *Times* did offer a generous and full page obituary when Mullah Omar's death was announced in the summer of 2015.

[173] *The Independent*, quoting Maj Will Pike in The Interview, 9 November 2008.

[174] 44th Regiment memorial plaque, Essex Regimental Chapel, Warley, Essex.

[175] The Durand Agreement was signed on November 12, 1893 in Kabul by Amir Abdur Rahman and Sir Mortimer Durand.

[176] 1.150km long from its source in the Hindu Kush mountains, 80 kilometres west of Kabul.

[177] *The Infantryman*, 2008.

[178] Reported by Jean Mackenzie: New America Foundation, Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative Policy Paper, *The Battle for Afghanistan, Militancy and Conflict in Helmand*, September 2010.

[179] An employee of Morrison-Knudsen.

[180] Raphy Favre, *Exploring the Roots of Opium Poppy and Illicit Economy in Afghanistan*. November 2005.

[181] Martin, Michael, KCL Doctoral Thesis, *War on its Head, An oral history of the Helmandi conflict 1978-2012*, January 2013, p. 74.

[182] Report of the Site Selection of the Permanent Administrative Centre of the Helmand Valley Authority, 1953.

[183] R.B. Scott and Murad A. Asiel, *Lashkar Gah Survey: a demographic and econometric analysis*, 1970.

[184] *The Helmand Valley Project in Afghanistan*, AID Evaluation Special Study No18, Cynthia Clapp-Wincek and Emily Baldwin, December 1983, p. 24.

[185] Ibid, p. 22.

[186] Martin, Michael, KCL Doctoral Thesis, *War on its Head, An oral history of the Helmandi conflict 1978-2012*, January 2013, p. 81.

[187] Ibid.

[188] See Martin for a comprehensive and meticulous examination of this history.

[189] See *Helmand-Arghandab Valley Irrigation System – a Change Assessment: 1973-1990'* prepared by Development Alternative Inc. and Earth Satellite Corporation, February 1990.

[190] See TRADOC G2 Human Terrain System, United States Army, *My Cousin's Enemy is My Friend: A Study of Pashtun 'Tribes' in Afghanistan*, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, September 2009.

[191] Pathans: Handbook of the Indian Army, The Recruiting Office Peshawar, 1936.

[192] See Lutz Rzehak, *Doing Pashto*, Afghan Analysts Network, March 2011.

[193] 'Pathans: Handbooks for the Indian Army', 1938, P. 16.

[194] *The Times*, 2 November 2014.

[195] 'Ibid, p. 21.

[196] Series GSGS 5971, Sheet Tribal Areas in Helmand Province, Edition 1GSGS.

[197] Platoon Leading in Frontier Warfare, Military Training pamphlet 16 (India) 1945.

[198] Ibid, p. 3.

[199] Ibid, p. 3.

[200] Ibid, p. 4.

[201] Ibid, p. 6.

[202] Ibid, p. 10.

[203] *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, 'British Forces enter 'Opiumland', 6 March 2006.

[204] UK Government figures.

[205] *Jane's Intelligence Review,* 'Heroin high land – The growth of Scotland's drug clans'. 15 March 2011.

[206] *The Independent* 8 November 2008.

[207] Cavanagh, Matt, *Ministerial Decision-Making in the Run-up to the Helmand Deployment*, RUSI, Vol 157 No 2, April/May 2012.

[208] The Afghan Papers: Committing Britain to War in Helmand 2005-2006, The Helmand Decision, Whitehall Papers, Cross-Government Planning and the Helmand Decision 2005-2006, RUSI Journal.

[209] To be fair to the 'Reid Group', many of these questions can only be answered by a 'Hoon Group', if such an entity existed, but everyone connected with this period is, at the time of writing, doing a remarkably good job at lying low.

[210] John Reid statement to Parliament, 26 January 2006.

[211] Ed Butler, Setting Ourselves up for a fall in Afghanistan, 13 March 2015, the RUSI Journal.

[212] Ibid.

[213] Wall evidence to Defence Select Committee, 11 May 2011.

[214] Ed Butler, Defence Committee Oral evidence: Decision making in Defence Policy, HC 682 Tuesday 16 December 2014.

[215] Ibid.

[216] Ibid.

[217] Ibid.

[218] Martin, Michael, KCL Doctoral Thesis, *War on its Head, An oral history of the Helmandi conflict 1978-2012*, January 2013, p. 187.

[219] http://www.c-span.org/person/?benjaminfreakley

[220] Ed Butler, Setting Ourselves up for a fall in Afghanistan, 13 March 2015, the RUSI Journal.

[221] Defence Secretary (John Reid) statement to the Commons, 26 January 2006.

[222] General Wall evidence to Defence Select Committee, 11 May 2011.

[223] General Richards evidence to Defence Select Committee, 11 May 2011.

[224] Jack Fairweather, *The Good War, The Battle for Afghanistan 2006-2014*, Jonathan Cape, Ch 8.

[225] James Fergusson, *A Million Bullets,* Corgi Books, 2009, p. 228.

[226] Westminster Hall debates, 17 June 2008.

[227] A *Changing Nation'* DfID support for Afghanistan, 2005.

[228] James Fergusson, *A Million Bullets*, Corgi Books, 2009, p. 244.

[229] DfID 'Quick Impact Projects: A handbook for the military', p. 11.

[230] James Fergusson, *A Million Bullets*, Corgi Books, 2009, p. 244.

[231] Commander's Emergency Response Program.

[232] Kim Howells evidence to Defence Select Committer, 6 January 2015.

[233] Westminster Hall debates, 17 June 2008.

[234] Pentagon Papers, Part IV-B-3, p. 111.

[235] Pentagon Papers, Part IV-B-3, p. 111.

[236] *Life Magazine*, 30July 1951.

[237] Butler evidence to Select Defence Committee, 5 May 2011.

[238] See James Fergusson *A Million Bullets*.

[239] Ibid.

[240] Poll undertaken by Altai Consulting 10 December 2005.

[241] See Ed Butler evidence to Select Defence Committee 5 May 2011.

[242] David Richards, *Taking Command*, Headline Publishing Group, 2014, . 203.

[243] Major General Richard's Directive to ISAF on assuming command of RC (SW).

[244] Ibid.

[245] MOD, *Future Conflict – Insights from interviews with senior commanders,* 30 January 2006.

[246] *Military Operations* news article, 'Para soldiers on their way to Afghanistan,' 3 May 2006.

[247] Patrick Bishop, *3 PARA*, Harper Press 2007, p. 19.

[248] Combat Support and Combat Service Support units included: 13 Air Assault Support Regiment;; 16 Close Support Medical Regiment; 156 Provost Company, Royal Military Police; 8 Close Support Squadron, 7 Air Assault Battalion, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers; 216 Signal Squadron and the 16 Air Assault Brigade's Headquarters staff.

[249] Butler evidence to Select Defence Committee, 5 May 2011.

[250] Ibid.

[251] NAO figures.

[252] Patrick Bishop, *3 PARA,* Harper Press 2007, p. 40.

[253] James Fergusson, *A Million Bullets*, Corgi Books, 2009, p. 115.

[254] Ibid.

[255] Garren Shipley, *nvdaliy.com*, 11 October 2008.

[256] See http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=1172

[257] Ibid.

[258] Ibid.

[259] Martin, Michael, KCL Doctoral Thesis, *War on its Head, An oral history of the Helmandi conflict 1978-2012*, January 2013.

[260] Jack Fairweather, *The Good War, The Battle for Afghanistan 2006-2014*, Jonathan Cape 2014, p.162.

[261] Jack Fairweather, The Good War, The Battle for Afghanistan 2006-2014, Jonathan Cape 2014, Ch 13.

[262] Ed Butler, Setting Ourselves up for a fall in Afghanistan, 13 March 2015, the RUSI Journal.

[263] General Richards evidence to Defence Select Committee, 11 May 2011.

[264] In '*Malakand Field Force 1898*' Chapter 1.

[265] Martin, Michael, KCL Doctoral Thesis, *War on its Head, An oral history of the Helmandi conflict 1978-2012*, January 2013, pp. 181-182.

[266] Notably by Antonio Giustozzi.

[267] Martin, Michael, KCL Doctoral Thesis, *War on its Head, An oral history of the Helmandi conflict 1978-2012*, January 2013, p. 116.

[268] Centre on International Cooperation, *Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan: The False Promise of Crop Eradication*, Barnett R. Rubin and Jake Sherman, page 26.

[269] *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 November 2010.

[270] See Ron Synovitz, *Plan To Recruit Militia As Police Sparks Concern*, Radio Free Europe, 16 June 2006.

[271] Martin, Michael, KCL Doctoral Thesis, *War on its Head, An oral history of the Helmandi conflict 1978-2012*, January 2013, p. 193.

[272] *The Sunday Times*, Culture section, 6 November 2011.

[273] Dr Kim Howells, see House of Commons Hansard Debates, 20 February 2007.

[274] See Tom Coghlan *Afghan expect record opium poppy crop and the Taliban will reap the rewards*, The Independent, 11 May 2006.

[275] Ed Butler evidence to Defence Select Committee, 5 May 2010.

[276] General Wall evidence to the Defence Select Committee, 11 May 2011.

[277] DISC Tribal Background Brief 2009.

[278] Martin, Michael, KCL Doctoral Thesis, *War on its Head, An oral history of the Helmandi conflict 1978-2012*, January 2013, p. 181.

[279] See Wikileaks Afghan War Logs.

[280] Martin, Michael, KCL Doctoral Thesis, *War on its Head, An oral history of the Helmandi conflict 1978-2012*, January 2013, p. 181.

[281] From Wikileaks, *Afghan War Logs*.

[282] Pajhwok News, 3 August 2013.

[283] Martin, Mike, An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict, C.Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 2014.

[284] Ed Butler, Defence Committee Oral evidence: Decision making in Defence Policy, HC 682 Tuesday 16 December 2014.

[285] According to Michael Martin, the police chief was a Noorzai named Sarwar Jan, p. 200.

[286] See Cordesman *Pakistan and Afghanistan: the Real War*, December 2007 for example.

[287] See Section 4.8 of Martin, Michael, KCL Doctoral Thesis, *War on its Head, An oral history of the Helmandi conflict 1978-2012*, January 2013.

[288] Ibid.

[289] Ibid, p. 167.

[290] *Special Warfare*, May-June 2006, Volume 19, Issue 3.

[291] Martin, Michael, KCL Doctoral Thesis, *War on its Head, An oral history of the Helmandi conflict 1978-2012*, January 2013, p. 139.

[292] Mackenzie, Jean, New America Foundation, Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative Policy Paper, *The Battle for Afghanistan, Militancy and Conflict in Helmand*, September 2010, p. 9.

[293] It appears 23 locals were killed.

[294] Patrick Bishop, *3 PARA*, Harper Press 2007, p. 83.

[295] To be strictly accurate, Pathfinders had exchanged fire with police who engaged them on 6 April near Now Zad.

[296] Anthony King, '*Understanding the Helmand Campaign: British Military Operations in Afghanistan*, March 2010.

[297] Browne evidence to Defence Select Committee, 29 March 2011.

[298] Browne evidence to Defence Select Committee, 29 March 2011.

[299] Ibid.

[300] Defence Secretary (Des Browne) statement to the Commons, July 2008.

[301] Browne evidence to Defence Select Committee, 29 March 2011.

[302] Mike Jackson testimony to Defence Select Committee, 5 May 2011.

[303] *Defence Policy and News* article, 'John Hutton reiterates the case for the Afghanistan operation', 11 November 2008.

[304] 10 Platoon was relieved.

[305] James Fergusson, *A Million Bullets*, Corgi Books, 2009, p. 117.

[306] Three casualties were suffered, one relatively serious.

[307] *Military Operations* news article 2 Aug 2006.

[308] James Fergusson, *A Million Bullets*, Corgi Books, 2009, p. 148.

[309] Ibid, p.136.

[310] Ibid, p. 157.

[311] Ibid, p. 174.

[312] Ibid, p. 126.

[313] Malakand Field Force, p 84.

[314] James Fergusson, *A Million Bullet,*, Corgi Books, 2009, p. 179.

[315] An observation the author owes to Henry Kissinger from *The White House Years*.

[316] Martin, Michael, KCL Doctoral Thesis, *War on its Head, An oral history of the Helmandi conflict 1978-2012*, January 2013, p. 165.

[317] Ibid, p. 200.

[318] *The Infantryman* 2006.

[319] Leo Docherty, Scots Guards, author of *Desert of Death*, quoted by Niall Fergusson in *One Million Bullets*, p. 197.

[320] Patrick Bishop, *3 PARA*, Harper Press 2007, p 115.

[321] Weapon Mount Installation Kit.

[322] Light Armoured Vehicles.

[323] Command and Control.

[324] Patrick Bishop, *3 PARA*, Harper Press 2007, p.179.

[325] Patrick Bishop, *3 PARA*, Harper Press 2007, p. 211.

[326] MOD Obituary Cpl Mark Wright 3 PARA.

[327] None of the primary source documents written at the time by 3 Para, which the author has seen, make this claim.

[328] http://www.mfsg.org.uk/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=306&OB=DESC&PN=145&title=daily-news

[329] There was a second incident in 2010 involving two soldiers who became trapped in an alleyway blocked by presumed IEDs. In fact the two IEDs that had already detonated and severely wounded their colleagues were the only IEDs in the alleyway. Rather than take any further chances an American helicopter with a winch lifted them to safety.

[330] Daily Telegraph, *Troops blown up by Afghan mines sue MOD*, 28 Feb 2007.

[331] James Fergusson, *A Million Bullets*, Corgi Books, 2009, p. 353.

[332] Patrick Bishop, *3 PARA*, Harper Press 2007, p. 155.

[333] Colonel Stuart Tootal, *Danger Close*, John Murray, 2009, p. 197.

[334] Patrick Bishop, *3 PARA*, Harper Press 2007, p. 229.

[335] Combat Vehicle Reconnaissance (Tracked).

[336] James Fergusson, *A Million Bullets*, Corgi Books, 2009, p. 322.

[337] *Military Operations* news article 8 August 2006.

[338] Light Armoured Vehicles.

[339] Patrick Bishop, *3 PARA*, Harper Press 2007, p. 227.

[340] *Military Operations* news article 12 October 2006.

[341] James Fergusson, *A Million Bullets*, Corgi Books, 2009, p. 373.

[342] *Military Operations* news article, ‘Coming home, 3 Para battlegroup talk about their battle with the Taliban’, 12 October 2006.

[343] The Guardian, *Special Report Afghanistan*, 15 December 2008.

[344] http://dizzythinks.net/2007/03/does-hilary-benn-know-what-hes-doing.html

[345] Preparation for Op HERRICK 4 was inhibited by the lack of early, formal political direction and a strictly enforced manning cap (3150), established upon apparently best case rather than most likely or worst case planning assumptions and taking little account of the enemy vote. Consequently, the whole of the PDT package and force generation process

was subject to severe time constraints and was largely sub-optimal. The force generation process failed consistently to match the FET with deductions gleaned from the tactical estimate. The generation of the Operational Equipment Table (OET) was hampered by the same time constraints that plagued the remainder of the Force Generation process, but also because the MoD and Treasury were unwilling to commit funds to Urgent Operational Requirements (UOR) enhancements prior to any formal political announcements. On-going UORs were halted during the 2-month delay period. As a result, many key items of equipment arrived in theatre late and some even failed to meet the Op HERRICK 4 deployment at all. ARRSE.

[346] Opinion piece by Tim Ripley: *Does UOR success hide UK procurement cracks?* Jane's Defence Weekly.

[347] Andrew Wilder, Stuart Gordon, *Money Can't Buy America Love*, 1 December 2009.

[348] *Military Operations* news article 12 October 2006.

[349] Op BANNER, An Analysis of Military Operations in Northern Ireland, MOD.

[350] See BAR Spring 2011, Anthony King, 'Military Command in the Last Decade', reprint of an article in *International Affairs*, Volume 87, Issue 21, March 2011, for discussion on failings of British command.

[351] See Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *Helmand Assault* for a pen portrait of Brigadier Thomas.

[352] *The Infantryman*, 2007.

[353] With the exception of 52 Brigade under Brigadier Mackay.

[354] *The Infantryman*, 2007.

[355] Ibid.

[356] This would be re-published in 2001.

[357] Quoted in MOD, *Network Centric Operations (NCO) Case Study*, 12 February 2007, p. 58.

[358] Kelley, Kevin J, *The Longest War, Northern Ireland and the I.R.A.*, Zed Books Ltd, 1990,p. 142.

[359] Op BANNER, MOD

[360] Ibid.

[361] Ibid. The figures are derived from *Lost Lives* by McKittrick, Keltes, Feeney and Thornton, Mainstream Publishing, 2001.

[362] MOD, *Network Centric Operations (NCO) Case Study*, 12 February 2007, p. 130.

[363] Op BANNER, MOD.

[364] Ibid.

[365] There were several thousand successful prosecutions in the Diplock Courts for 'terrorist offences' but these were not related to the actual perpetration of an attack or murder. Successful prosecutions of individuals who had killed were much harder to obtain.

[366] Colonel Michael Dewar, *The British Army in Northern Ireland*, Arms and Armour Press, 1996.

[367] Kelley, Kevin J, *The Longest War, Northern Ireland and the I.R.A.*, Zed Books Ltd, 1990, p. 296.

[368] All the deployment details in this paragraph from Ewen Southby-Tailyour.

[369] J Quinlivan. Burden of Victory. The Painful Arithmetic of Stability Operations. Rand Review, Summer 2003.

[370] John Godges, *Afghanistan on the Edge*, Rand Review, Summer 2007, p. 17.

[371] Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *3 Commando Brigade*, Random House Group, 2009, p. 83.

[372] John Fairweather, *The Good War, The Battle for Afghanistan 2006-2014*, Jonathan Cape, 2014, pp. 234-235.

[373] See Chapter 3 of Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *3 Commando Brigade*, Random House Group, 2009.

[374] Ibid.

[375] Ibid.

[376] *The Infantryman*, 2007.

[377] See Chapter 5 of Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *3 Commando Brigade*, Random House Group, 2009 for a detailed account of Mike Company operations in Kajaki.

[378] See page 181 of Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *'3 Commando Brigade'* Random House Group, 2009.

[379] See p. 207 of Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *3 Commando Brigade*, Random House Group, 2009.

[380] *The Infantryman* 2007.

[381] Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *3 Commando Brigade*, Random House Group, 2009. p.104.

[382] Martin, Michael, KCL Doctoral Thesis, *War on its Head, An oral history of the Helmandi conflict 1978-2012*, January 2013, p. 201.

[383] Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *3 Commando Brigade*, Random House Group, 2009. p. 130.

[384] See Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *3 Commando Brigade*, Random House Group, 2009. pp. 133-141 for a detailed description of this operation.

[385] See See Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *3 Commando Brigade*, Random House Group, 2009. pp. 166-172 for a detailed description of this operation.

[386] Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *3 Commando Brigade*, Random House Group, 2009, page 6. See Chapter 1 for a detailed account of this raid.

[387] *Military Operations* news article, 'Marine attempt daring Apache rescue during Afghanistan operation', 17 January 2007.

[388] See pages 236 – 243 of Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *3 Commando Brigade*, Random House Group, 2009, for a detailed account of this operation.

[389] *Jane's International Defence Review*.

[390] Gary E. Langar and ABC Polling Unit, ABC News/BBC/ARD poll '*Where things stand in Afghanistan,'* 3 December 2007.

[391] Environics, *'2007 Survey of Afghans'*, 19 October 2007.

[392] Gary E. Langar and ABC Polling Unit, ABC News/BBC/ARD poll '*Where things stand in Afghanistan,'* 3 December 2007.

[393] Ibid.

[394] Ibid.

[395] Pentagon Papers, Part IV-C-1, p.40.

[396] Quoted in Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor', 'The Taliban's Spring Offensive', 30 March 2007.

[397] According to Patrick Hennessy this is not the case. A Ugandan prince apparently once served in the Grenadier Guards as an officer, although it is not clear whether he held honorary rank or actually fulfilled a meaningful role.

[398] 1 Coldm Gds Queen's Company blog dated 23 March 2007.

[399] Herrick 6 – 19 Regiment RA CO's blog, 23 July 2007.

[400] Helmand Highlander, Edition 1, undated.

[401] Colonel Richard Kemp and Chris Hughes, Attack State Red, Penguin Books Ltd, 2010, p. 206.

[402] Ibid, p. 43.

[403] Ibid pp. 65-66.

[404] Military Operations news article, reference lost.

[405] Kemp and Hughes, p. 89.

[406] Ibid, p. 97.

[407] Military Operations news article, 'Baptism of fire for Grenadier Guards officer in Afghanistan', 21 May 2007.

[408] Helmand Highlander, Edition 3, June 2007.

[409] Report of the Secretary General of the UN to the General Assembly on the situation in Afghanistan, A/62/345-S/2007/555, 21 September 2007.

[410] The Infantryman, 2008.

[411] Military Operations news article, reference lost.

[412] Helmand Highlander, Edition 3, June 2007.

[413] Military Operations news article, 'Success of Sangin operation allows troops to engage with Afghan locals', 4 June 2007.

[414] CIA Memo, The Soviets and the Tribes of Southwest Asia, 23 September 1980.

[415] Peter Dahl Thruelsen, Implementing the Comprehensive Approach in Helmand – Within the Context of Counterinsurgency, Faculty of Strategy and Military Operations, Royal Danish Defence College, October 2008, p. 32.

[416] Pajhwok, 3 Ocober 2012.

[417] Military Operations news article, 'Royal Engineers take on the difficult task of reconstruction in Helmand', 13 August 2007.

[418] UNODC World Drug Report 2000, p. 24.

[419] Quoted in Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor, 'Opium and the Afghan Insurgency', 7 September 2007.

[420] Martin, Michael, KCL Doctoral Thesis, War on its Head, An oral history of the Helmandi conflict 1978-2012, January 2013, p. 170.

[421] Ibid, p. 171.

[422] Centre on International Cooperation, Barnett R. Rubin and Jake Sherman, 'Counter-Narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan: The False Promise of Eradication', quoting research conducted by Charney Research, February 2008.

[423] Kemp and Hughes, p. 224.

[424] Ibid, p. 237.

[425] Military Operations news article, Lorraine McBride, 'Vikings recall being under fire', 4 July 2007.

[426] Kemp and Hughes, p. 243.

[427] The standard army helmet would be re-designed several times, eventually culminating in the Mk7A that did provide better protection against small calibre fire.

[428] Military Operations news article, 'Taliban forced back as UK troops build bridges in Helmand', 22 June 2007.

[429] Military Operations news article, 'Kajaki 'Vikings' are kings of the hill', 16 August 2007.

[430] Ibid.

[431] The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.

[432] The Force Protection story was American in more ways than one: a victim of its spectacular success, the company was bought out by a larger defence manufacturer.

[433] A single rocket appears to have fallen short in the course of the war.

[434] 39 Regt RA Blog, undated.

[435] JIDR, Artillery, Rupert Pengelly, 'Rockets and mortars answer the call for precision', 7 September 2009.

[436] Military Operations news article, Equipment and logistics vital to Afghan mission, 15 June 2007.

[437] General Sir Andrew Skeen, Passing it on – Short talks on tribal fighting on the North-West Frontier of India, Gale and Polden Ltd, 1932, p. 3.

[438] Herrick 6 – 19 Regiment RA, CO's blog, 23 July 2007.

[439] History and Honour news article, 184 honoured for courage and professionalism on Operations, 7 March 2008.

[440] MOD figures.

[441] Ibid, and all other data in this paragraph.

[442] CENTAF CAOC, 5 December 2007.

[443] CIA, Office of Near Eastern and Asian Analysis and Office of Soviet Analysis, The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: 5 Years Later, May 1985.

[444] Data is conflicting. Some MOD data suggests: Op Herrick 6, 1096 and avg 40, Op Herrick 5, 821 and avg 30, and Op Herrick 4, 537 and avg 20.

[445] British ROE were based on the five principles of the Laws of Armed Conflict (military necessity, distinction, discrimination, proportionality and humanity), as well as the requirement to achieve Positive Identification (PID) of the target. The majority of engagements were conducted as self-defence under JSP 398 Card 'Alpha' rules. Attacks were conducted under ROE 421, 422 and 429A which effectively authorised a British serviceman to conduct offensive engagements against persons judged to be manifesting intent to or actually committing hostile acts. Over the course of the war, Task Force Helmand was involved in tens of thousands of engagements with the enemy. Instances where the ROE may have been bypassed or loosely interpreted remained extremely rare. They almost invariably arose from 'fog of war' situations, rather than wilful bending of the rules. The biggest single challenge – despite the deployment of an array of technologies – was achieving PID.

[446] History and Honour news article, '184 honoured for courage and professionalism on Operations', 7 March 2008.

[447] History and Honour news article, 'Afghanistan honours 'reflect the actions of all', 7 March 2008.

[448] History and Honour news article, 'Royal Anglian officer 'humbled' by award', 9 March 2008.

[449] Mark Townsend interview, The *Guardian*, 5 August 2007.

[450] Defence Policy and Business news article, 'Defeating the Taliban tactically at every turn: US and UK Defence Secretaries talk common goals', 11 October 2007.

[451] WO2 MJ Pelling RM, A Company Sergeant Major's Notes on Op Herrick 5, BAR 144.

[452] Stirrup evidence to Defence Select Committee, 11 May 2011.

[453] *As You Like It*, Act 22, Scene 7, Jaques.

[454] Donald J. Mrozek, Air Power& the Ground War in Vietnam, an AFA Book, Pergammon-Brassey's, 1989, p.52.

[455] Anthony Cordesman, *Assessing the Afghan-Pakistani Conflict*, 3 December 2009, p. 5.

[456] Ibid., p. 21

[457] *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, 'Opium and the Afghan Insurgency', 12 September 2007.

[458] Anthony Cordesman, *Assessing the Afghan-Pakistani Conflict,* 3 December 2009, p. 10.

[459] Government Accountability Office (GAO*), 'Securing, stabilizing, and Reconstructing Afghanistan'*, Report to Congressional Committees, GAO-07-801SP, May 2007.

[460] USCENTCOM Brief and UNA/62/722-2/2008/159, 6 March 2008.

[461] Anthony Cordesman adapted from *The Washington Post*, 30 September 2007.

[462] Anthony Cordesman adapted from UNAMA, *Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan, 2001-2007*, 1 September 2007 and Martin Linnet. *Afghanistan Index*, October 2007, & UNA/62/722-S/2008/159, 6 March 2008.

[463] UN JCMB (the Joint Coordinating and Monitoring Board) Secretariat Report, 3 October 2007.

[464] Quoted by Matt Waldman, *Golden Surrender?* Afghanistan Analysts Network, p. 4.

[465] 1 Coldstream Guards Herrick 7 blog

[466] Ibid.

[467] Ibid.

[468] Stephen Grey, *Operation Snakebite*, Viking, Penguin Books, 2009.

[469] Combat Vehicle Reconnaissance Tracked.

[470] *Jane's Armour and Artillery*, Scorpion Reconnaissance Vehicle.

[471] Peter Viggo Jakobsen and Peter Dahl Thruelsen, *Clear, Hold, Train: Denmark's Military Operations in Helmand 2006-2010*, Danish Foreign Policy Yearbook 2011.

[472] Ibid.

[473] See Jakobsen and Thruelsen.

[474] GBU-12, GBU-38 or JDAM.

[475] *Equipment and Logistics* news article, 'RAF Reaper fires weapons for first time', 6 June 2008.

[476] COIN in Helmand, Task Force Operational Design, 30 October 2007.

[477] Ibid.

[478] Ibid.

[479] Mackay, Andrew and Tatham, Steve, *Behavioural Conflict, From General to Strategic Corporal: Complexity, Adaptation and* Influence, The Shrivenham Papers, No 9, December 2009.

[480] Ibid.

[481] Ibid.

[482] Ibid.

[483] Number 3 Company blog, 1 Coldstream Guards, Op Herrick 7.

[484] 1 Coldstream Guards Herrick 7 blog.

[485] Ibid.

[486] Number 3 Company blog, 1 Coldstream Guards, Op Herrick 7.

[487] Ibid.

[488] The Number 3 Company handover was initially with D Company, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (5 Scots).

[489] MOD figures - JDN 2/08.

[490] MOD figures and all other data in this paragraph.

[491] *Jane's International Defence Review*, 'Apache's path to war: 'air-land' integration for all in Afghanistan', 15 June 2010 - During the first AH.1 Apache deployment by 656 Sqn in May-August 2006, with only eight aircraft in theatre, some 7,305 30 mm rounds, 68 rockets and 11 Hellfire missiles were fired. During the following tour, which 664 Sqn concluded in November 2006 (before being relieved once again by 656 Sqn), 2,147 hours were flown, in the course of which 9,110 30 mm rounds, 65 rockets and 28 Hellfire II semi-active laser-guided missiles were expended. Thereafter the levels increased significantly: for example, in its May-August 2007 tour (still with eight aircraft) 662 Sqn is recorded as having fired around 18,500 30 mm rounds, 550 rockets and 72 Hellfires.

[492] Stephen Grey, *Operation Snakebite*, Viking, Penguin Books, 2009, p. 66.

[493] See Chapter 8 of *Operation Snakebite*.

[494] Martin, Michael, KCL Doctoral Thesis, *War on its Head, An oral history of the Helmandi conflict 1978-2012*, January 2013, p. 209.

[495] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-ff9a9c01-faa4-4038-b4e9-83e619460e1f

[496] Stephen Grey, *Operation Snakebite*, Viking, Penguin Books, 2009, p. 102.

[497] Ibid, p. 122.

[498] Ibid, p. 124.

[499] See Chapter 18 of Stephen Grey, *Operation Snakebite*, Viking, Penguin Group, 2009.

[500] Ibid, pp. 147- 148.

[501] See Chapter 19 of Stephen Grey, *Operation Snakebite*, Viking, Penguin Group, 2009.

[502] Ibid, p. 152.

[503] History and Honour news article, 12 August 2008.

[504] Ibid, pp. 174-177.

[505] *History and Honour* news article, 12 August 2008.

[506] CS OMLT blog,, Green Howards, Op Herrick 7.

[507] Stephen Grey, *Operation Snakebite*, Viking, Penguin Group, 2009, pp. 178-179.

[508] Ibid, p. 191.

[509] Ibid, p. 193.

[510] Ibid, pp. 194-201.

[511] See Chapter 24 of Stephen Grey, *Operation Snakebite*, Viking, Penguin Group, 2009.

[512] Ibid, p. 273.

[513] *Equipment and Logistics* news article, 'Final Posting Dates to Theatre', 1 December 2008.

[514] 1 Coldstream Guards Herrick 7 blog.

[515] Stephen Grey, *Operation Snakebite*, Viking, Penguin Books, 2009, p. 82.

[516] Ibid.

[517] B Company, 1 RGR blog, Op Herrick 7.

[518] Ibid.

[519] QM blog, 1 RGR, Op Herrick 7.

[520] Carl Forsberg, Institute for the Study of War, *The Taliban's Campaign for Kandahar*, 2009, p. 23.

[521] A Company blog, 1 RGR, Op Herrick 7.

[522] Ibid.

[523] *History and Honour* news article, 'Gurkhas honoured by Queen for bravery in Afghanistan', 5 November 2008.

[524] See Mackay, Andrew and Tatham, Steve, *Behavioural Conflict, From General to Strategic Corporal: Complexity, Adaptation and* Influence, The Shrivenham Papers, No 9, December 2009.

[525] 23 Engineer Regiment (Air Assault) Newsletter, 17 March 2008.

[526] BAR 144, originally from an article in *Prospect* in which Rory Stewart and Sherard-Cowper Coles exchanged views on Afghanistan in the form of letters.

[527] Afghanistan Study Group Report, *Revitalizing our efforts, Rethinking our strategy*, Gen James L. Jones USMC (Retd) and Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering, 30 January 2008.

[528] On the record discussions with General McNeill and farewell briefing at the Pentagon, 13 June 2008.

[529] Sam Kiley, *Desperate Glory At War in Helmand with Britain's 16 Air Assault Brigade*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2009, p. 7.

[530] Anthony Cordesman, *Ongoing Lessons of the Afghan Conflict*, 6 May 2004, p. 8.

[531] Patrick Bishop, *Ground Truth*, Harper Press 2009, pp. 18-19.

[532] Ibid.

[533] *ISAF Mirror*, July 2008.

[534] Ibid.

[535] 1 RIR blog, Op Herrick 8.

[536] Lt Peter Gavin, 1 R IRISH, Op Herrick 8.

[537] 1 RIR blog, Op Herrick 8.

[538] *Soldier* April 2009.

[539] Cpl Walden, 4 Platoon, B Company, 2 PARA blog, Op Herrick 8.

[540] Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania*.

[541] Pte Adams, 5 Platoon, B Company, 2 PARA blog, Op Herrick 8.

[542] 5 SCOTS blog, Operation Herrick 8.

[543] *JIDR*, Rupert Pengelly, 'Infantry look to C4I aids for tempo without torment', 9 July 2009.

[544] *Equipment and Logistics* article, 'Bullet magnet praises body armour for twice saving life', 6 January 2011.

[545] BAR 150.

[546] *The Infantryman*, 2007.

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[977] Eventually, 21 convictions were reportedly secured, *Times* 1 October 2014.

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[988] ICOS Survey of Afghan Attitudes on the Taliban and the War: August 2010.

[989] MOD figures: 32 contacts per day and 5,372 SIGACTs.

[990] MOD figures: 421 WIA.

[991] MOD figures: 478 EKIA, 233 EWIA, 8 CIVCAS.

[992] A high figure of 285 CIVCAS was reported but it is unclear whether this encompassed all CIVCAS incidents across south-west Afghanistan. Such a figure would more closely tally with CIVCAS statistics offered by organisations like the UN.

[993] LashkarGah 140,000, Babaji 36,000, Chah-e Anjir 14,000, Nad-e Ali 60,000.

[994] To give a sense of numbers, by Operation Herrick 12, over 17,000 profiles had been collected, creating around 100 matches to IEDs, and suggesting between 20-40 teams.

[995] NATO/ISAF data April 9 2009.

[996] See *The Longwar Journal* for details of special force raids. According to General Petraeus in testimony to the US Congress on 16 March 2011, around 350 insurgent leaders were being killed or captured every 90 days.

[997] See *The Sunday Times*, 6 June 2011.

[998] Linschoten, Alex Strick van, and Kuehn, Felix, *A Knock on the Door: 22 Months of ISAF Press Releases*, Afghanistan Analysis Network, 2011.

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[1005] Sergeant Andrew Coull RAF, 2 Para, Op Herrick 13.

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[1009] Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 3 December 2009.

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[1022] Reporting by Lieutenant Colonel Adam Griffiths, CO Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (5 Scots), who commanded the PDATT in a *Military Operations* news article.

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[1048] Ibid.

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